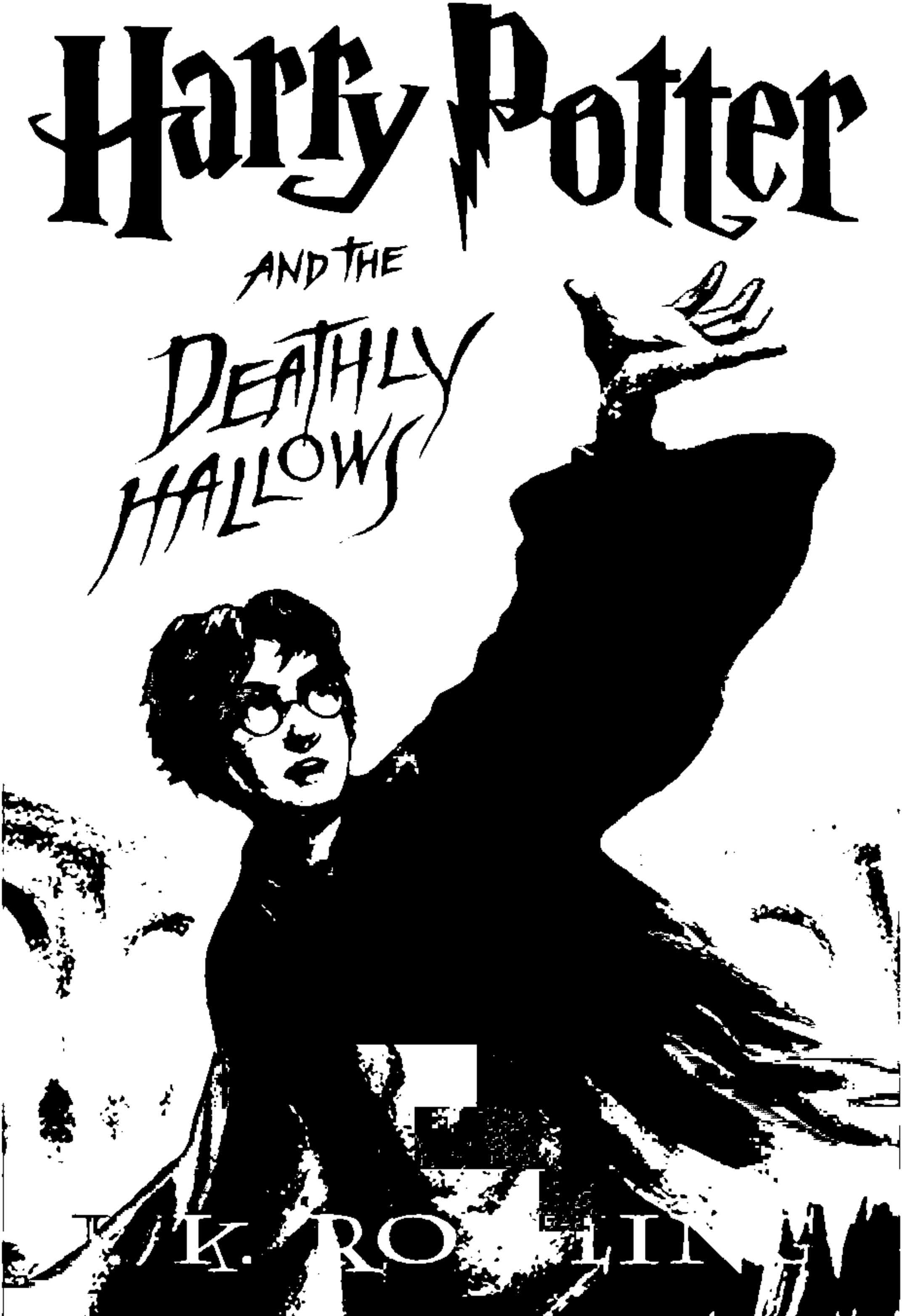

Harry Potter
AND THE
DEATHLY
HALLOWS

HARRY POTTER
AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS



BY

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARY GRANDPRÉ

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THE
DEDICATION
OF THIS BOOK
IS SPLIT
SEVEN WAYS:
TO NEIL,
TO JESSICA,
TO DAVID,
TO KENZIE,
TO DI,
TO ANNE,
AND TO YOU,
IF YOU HAVE
STUCK
WITH HARRY
UNTIL THE
VERY
END.

CONTENTS

Oh, the torment bred in the race,
the grinding scream of death
and the stroke that hits the vein,
the hemorrhage none can staunch, the grief,
the curse no man can bear.

But there is a cure in the house,
and not outside it, no,
not from others but from *them*,
their bloody strife. We sing to you,
dark gods beneath the earth.

Now hear, you blissful powers underground —
answer the call, send help.
Bless the children, give them triumph now.

Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers*

Death is but crossing the world, as friends do the seas; they live in one another still. For they must needs be present, that love and live in that which is omnipresent. In this divine glass, they see face to face; and their converse is free, as well as pure. This is the comfort of friends, that though they may be said to die, yet

their friendship and society are, in the best sense, ever present, because immortal.

William Penn, *More Fruits of Solitude*

CHAPTER ONE



THE DARK LORD ASCENDING

The two men appeared out of nowhere, a few yards apart in the narrow, moonlit lane. For a second they stood quite still, wands directed at each other's chests; then, recognizing each other, they stowed their wands beneath their cloaks and started walking briskly in the same direction.

"News?" asked the taller of the two.

"The best," replied Severus Snape.

The lane was bordered on the left by wild, low-growing brambles, on the right by a high, neatly manicured hedge. The men's long cloaks flapped around their ankles as they marched.

"Thought I might be late," said Yaxley, his blunt features sliding in

and out of sight as the branches of overhanging trees broke the moonlight. "It was a little trickier than I expected. But I hope he will be satisfied. You sound confident that your reception will be good?"

Snape nodded, but did not elaborate. They turned right, into a wide driveway that led off the lane. The high hedge curved with them, running off into the distance beyond the pair of impressive wrought-iron gates barring the men's way. Neither of them broke step: In silence both raised their left arms in a kind of salute and passed straight through, as though the dark metal were smoke.

The yew hedges muffled the sound of the men's footsteps. There was a rustle somewhere to their right: Yaxley drew his wand again, pointing it over his companion's head, but the source of the noise proved to be nothing more than a pure-white peacock, strutting majestically along the top of the hedge.

"He always did himself well, Lucius. *Peacocks* . . ." Yaxley thrust his wand back under his cloak with a snort.

A handsome manor house grew out of the darkness at the end of the straight drive, lights glinting in the diamond-paned downstairs windows. Somewhere in the dark garden beyond the hedge a fountain was playing. Gravel crackled beneath their feet as Snape and Yaxley sped toward the front door, which swung inward at their approach, though nobody had visibly opened it.

The hallway was large, dimly lit, and sumptuously decorated, with a magnificent carpet covering most of the stone floor. The eyes of the pale-faced portraits on the walls followed Snape and Yaxley as they strode past. The two men halted at a heavy wooden door leading into the next room, hesitated for the space of a heartbeat, then Snape

turned the bronze handle.

The drawing room was full of silent people, sitting at a long and ornate table. The room's usual furniture had been pushed carelessly up against the walls. Illumination came from a roaring fire beneath a handsome marble mantelpiece surmounted by a gilded mirror. Snape and Yaxley lingered for a moment on the threshold. As their eyes grew accustomed to the lack of light, they were drawn upward to the strangest feature of the scene: an apparently unconscious human figure hanging upside down over the table, revolving slowly as if suspended by an invisible rope, and reflected in the mirror and in the bare, polished surface of the table below. None of the people seated underneath this singular sight was looking at it except for a pale young man sitting almost directly below it. He seemed unable to prevent himself from glancing upward every minute or so.

"Yaxley. Snape," said a high, clear voice from the head of the table. "You are very nearly late."

The speaker was seated directly in front of the fireplace, so that it was difficult, at first, for the new arrivals to make out more than his silhouette. As they drew nearer, however, his face shone through the gloom, hairless, snakelike, with slits for nostrils and gleaming red eyes whose pupils were vertical. He was so pale that he seemed to emit a pearly glow.

"Severus, here," said Voldemort, indicating the seat on his immediate right. "Yaxley — beside Dolohov."

The two men took their allotted places. Most of the eyes around the table followed Snape, and it was to him that Voldemort spoke first.

"So?"

"My Lord, the Order of the Phoenix intends to move Harry Potter from his current place of safety on Saturday next, at nightfall."

The interest around the table sharpened palpably: Some stiffened, others fidgeted, all gazing at Snape and Voldemort.

"Saturday . . . at nightfall," repeated Voldemort. His red eyes fastened upon Snape's black ones with such intensity that some of the watchers looked away, apparently fearful that they themselves would be scorched by the ferocity of the gaze. Snape, however, looked calmly back into Voldemort's face and, after a moment or two, Voldemort's lipless mouth curved into something like a smile.

"Good. Very good. And this information comes —"

"— from the source we discussed," said Snape.

"My Lord."

Yaxley had leaned forward to look down the long table at Voldemort and Snape. All faces turned to him.

"My Lord, I have heard differently."

Yaxley waited, but Voldemort did not speak, so he went on, "Dawlish, the Auror, let slip that Potter will not be moved until the thirtieth, the night before the boy turns seventeen."

Snape was smiling.

"My source told me that there are plans to lay a false trail; this must be it. No doubt a Confundus Charm has been placed upon Dawlish. It would not be the first time; he is known to be susceptible."

"I assure you, my Lord, Dawlish seemed quite certain," said Yaxley.

"If he has been Confunded, naturally he is certain," said Snape. "I assure *you,* Yaxley, the Auror Office will play no further part in the protection of Harry Potter. The Order believes that we have infiltrated the Ministry."

"The Order's got one thing right, then, eh?" said a squat man sitting a short distance from Yaxley; he gave a wheezy giggle that was echoed here and there along the table.

Voldemort did not laugh. His gaze had wandered upward to the body revolving slowly overhead, and he seemed to be lost in thought.

"My Lord," Yaxley went on, "Dawlish believes an entire party of Aurors will be used to transfer the boy —"

Voldemort held up a large white hand, and Yaxley subsided at once, watching resentfully as Voldemort turned back to Snape.

"Where are they going to hide the boy next?"

"At the home of one of the Order," said Snape. "The place, according to the source, has been given every protection that the Order and Ministry together could provide. I think that there is little chance of taking him once he is there, my Lord, unless, of course, the Ministry has fallen before next Saturday, which might give us the opportunity to discover and undo enough of the enchantments to break through the rest."

"Well, Yaxley?" Voldemort called down the table, the firelight glinting strangely in his red eyes. "*Will* the Ministry have fallen by next Saturday?"

Once again, all heads turned. Yaxley squared his shoulders.

"My Lord, I have good news on that score. I have — with difficulty, and after great effort — succeeded in placing an Imperius

Curse upon Pius Thicknesse."

Many of those sitting around Yaxley looked impressed; his neighbor, Dolohov, a man with a long, twisted face, clapped him on the back.

"It is a start," said Voldemort. "But Thicknesse is only one man. Scrimgeour must be surrounded by our people before I act. One failed attempt on the Minister's life will set me back a long way."

"Yes — my Lord, that is true — but you know, as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Thicknesse has regular contact not only with the Minister himself, but also with the Heads of all the other Ministry departments. It will, I think, be easy now that we have such a high-ranking official under our control, to subjugate the others, and then they can all work together to bring Scrimgeour down."

"As long as our friend Thicknesse is not discovered before he has converted the rest," said Voldemort. "At any rate, it remains unlikely that the Ministry will be mine before next Saturday. If we cannot touch the boy at his destination, then it must be done while he travels."

"We are at an advantage there, my Lord," said Yaxley, who seemed determined to receive some portion of approval. "We now have several people planted within the Department of Magical Transport. If Potter Apparates or uses the Floo Network, we shall know immediately."

"He will not do either," said Snape. "The Order is eschewing any form of transport that is controlled or regulated by the Ministry; they mistrust everything to do with the place."

"All the better," said Voldemort. "He will have to move in the open. Easier to take, by far."

Again, Voldemort looked up at the slowly revolving body as he went on, "I shall attend to the boy in person. There have been too many mistakes where Harry Potter is concerned. Some of them have been my own. That Potter lives is due more to my errors than to his triumphs."

The company around the table watched Voldemort apprehensively, each of them, by his or her expression, afraid that they might be blamed for Harry Potter's continued existence. Voldemort, however, seemed to be speaking more to himself than to any of them, still addressing the unconscious body above him.

"I have been careless, and so have been thwarted by luck and chance, those wreckers of all but the best-laid plans. But I know better now. I understand those things that I did not understand before. I must be the one to kill Harry Potter, and I shall be."

At these words, seemingly in response to them, a sudden wail sounded, a terrible, drawn-out cry of misery and pain. Many of those at the table looked downward, startled, for the sound had seemed to issue from below their feet.

"Wormtail," said Voldemort, with no change in his quiet, thoughtful tone, and without removing his eyes from the revolving body above, "have I not spoken to you about keeping our prisoner quiet?"

"Yes, m-my Lord," gasped a small man halfway down the table, who had been sitting so low in his chair that it had appeared, at first glance, to be unoccupied. Now he scrambled from his seat and scurried from the room, leaving nothing behind him but a curious

gleam of silver.

"As I was saying," continued Voldemort, looking again at the tense faces of his followers, "I understand better now. I shall need, for instance, to borrow a wand from one of you before I go to kill Potter."

The faces around him displayed nothing but shock; he might have announced that he wanted to borrow one of their arms.

"No volunteers?" said Voldemort. "Let's see . . . Lucius, I see no reason for you to have a wand anymore."

Lucius Malfoy looked up. His skin appeared yellowish and waxy in the firelight, and his eyes were sunken and shadowed. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse.

"My Lord?"

"Your wand, Lucius. I require your wand."

"I . . ."

Malfoy glanced sideways at his wife. She was staring straight ahead, quite as pale as he was, her long blonde hair hanging down her back, but beneath the table her slim fingers closed briefly on his wrist. At her touch, Malfoy put his hand into his robes, withdrew a wand, and passed it along to Voldemort, who held it up in front of his red eyes, examining it closely.

"What is it?"

"Elm, my Lord," whispered Malfoy.

"And the core?"

"Dragon — dragon heartstring."

"Good," said Voldemort. He drew out his own wand and compared the lengths. Lucius Malfoy made an involuntary movement;

for a fraction of a second, it seemed he expected to receive Voldemort's wand in exchange for his own. The gesture was not missed by Voldemort, whose eyes widened maliciously.

"Give you my wand, Lucius? *My* wand?"

Some of the throng sniggered.

"I have given you your liberty, Lucius, is that not enough for you? But I have noticed that you and your family seem less than happy of late. . . . What is it about my presence in your home that displeases you, Lucius?"

"Nothing — nothing, my Lord!"

"Such *lies,* Lucius . . ."

The soft voice seemed to hiss on even after the cruel mouth had stopped moving. One or two of the wizards barely repressed a shudder as the hissing grew louder; something heavy could be heard sliding across the floor beneath the table.

The huge snake emerged to climb slowly up Voldemort's chair. It rose, seemingly endlessly, and came to rest across Voldemort's shoulders: its neck the thickness of a man's thigh; its eyes, with their vertical slits for pupils, unblinking. Voldemort stroked the creature absently with long thin fingers, still looking at Lucius Malfoy.

"Why do the Malfoys look so unhappy with their lot? Is my return, my rise to power, not the very thing they professed to desire for so many years?"

"Of course, my Lord," said Lucius Malfoy. His hand shook as he wiped sweat from his upper lip. "We did desire it — we do."

To Malfoy's left, his wife made an odd, stiff nod, her eyes averted from Voldemort and the snake. To his right, his son, Draco, who had

been gazing up at the inert body overhead, glanced quickly at Voldemort and away again, terrified to make eye contact.

"My Lord," said a dark woman halfway down the table, her voice constricted with emotion, "it is an honor to have you here, in our family's house. There can be no higher pleasure."

She sat beside her sister, as unlike her in looks, with her dark hair and heavily lidded eyes, as she was in bearing and demeanor; where Narcissa sat rigid and impassive, Bellatrix leaned toward Voldemort, for mere words could not demonstrate her longing for closeness.

"No higher pleasure," repeated Voldemort, his head tilted a little to one side as he considered Bellatrix. "That means a great deal, Bellatrix, from you."

Her face flooded with color; her eyes welled with tears of delight.

"My Lord knows I speak nothing but the truth!"

"No higher pleasure . . . even compared with the happy event that, I hear, has taken place in your family this week?"

She stared at him, her lips parted, evidently confused.

"I don't know what you mean, my Lord."

"I'm talking about your niece, Bellatrix. And yours, Lucius and Narcissa. She has just married the werewolf, Remus Lupin. You must be so proud."

There was an eruption of jeering laughter from around the table. Many leaned forward to exchange gleeful looks; a few thumped the table with their fists. The great snake, disliking the disturbance, opened its mouth wide and hissed angrily, but the Death Eaters did not hear it, so jubilant were they at Bellatrix and the Malfoys' humiliation. Bellatrix's face, so recently flushed with happiness, had

turned an ugly, blotchy red.

"She is no niece of ours, my Lord," she cried over the outpouring of mirth. "We — Narcissa and I — have never set eyes on our sister since she married the Mudblood. This brat has nothing to do with either of us, nor any beast she marries."

"What say you, Draco?" asked Voldemort, and though his voice was quiet, it carried clearly through the catcalls and jeers. "Will you babysit the cubs?"

The hilarity mounted; Draco Malfoy looked in terror at his father, who was staring down into his own lap, then caught his mother's eye. She shook her head almost imperceptibly, then resumed her own deadpan stare at the opposite wall.

"Enough," said Voldemort, stroking the angry snake. "Enough."

And the laughter died at once.

"Many of our oldest family trees become a little diseased over time," he said as Bellatrix gazed at him, breathless and imploring. "You must prune yours, must you not, to keep it healthy? Cut away those parts that threaten the health of the rest."

"Yes, my Lord," whispered Bellatrix, and her eyes swam with tears of gratitude again. "At the first chance!"

"You shall have it," said Voldemort. "And in your family, so in the world . . . we shall cut away the canker that infects us until only those of the true blood remain. . . ."

Voldemort raised Lucius Malfoy's wand, pointed it directly at the slowly revolving figure suspended over the table, and gave it a tiny flick. The figure came to life with a groan and began to struggle against invisible bonds.

"Do you recognize our guest, Severus?" asked Voldemort.

Snape raised his eyes to the upside-down face. All of the Death Eaters were looking up at the captive now, as though they had been given permission to show curiosity. As she revolved to face the firelight, the woman said in a cracked and terrified voice, "Severus! Help me!"

"Ah, yes," said Snape as the prisoner turned slowly away again.

"And you, Draco?" asked Voldemort, stroking the snake's snout with his wand-free hand. Draco shook his head jerkily. Now that the woman had woken, he seemed unable to look at her anymore.

"But you would not have taken her classes," said Voldemort. "For those of you who do not know, we are joined here tonight by Charity Burbage who, until recently, taught at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

There were small noises of comprehension around the table. A broad, hunched woman with pointed teeth cackled.

"Yes . . . Professor Burbage taught the children of witches and wizards all about Muggles . . . how they are not so different from us . . . ."

One of the Death Eaters spat on the floor. Charity Burbage revolved to face Snape again.

"Severus . . . please . . . please . . ."

"Silence," said Voldemort, with another twitch of Malfoy's wand, and Charity fell silent as if gagged. "Not content with corrupting and polluting the minds of Wizarding children, last week Professor Burbage wrote an impassioned defense of Mudbloods in the *Daily Prophet*. Wizards, she says, must accept these thieves of their

knowledge and magic. The dwindling of the purebloods is, says Professor Burbage, a most desirable circumstance. . . . She would have us all mate with Muggles . . . or, no doubt, werewolves. . . .”

Nobody laughed this time: There was no mistaking the anger and contempt in Voldemort’s voice. For the third time, Charity Burbage revolved to face Snape. Tears were pouring from her eyes into her hair. Snape looked back at her, quite impassive, as she turned slowly away from him again.

“*Avada Kedavra.*”

The flash of green light illuminated every corner of the room. Charity fell, with a resounding crash, onto the table below, which trembled and creaked. Several of the Death Eaters leapt back in their chairs. Draco fell out of his onto the floor.

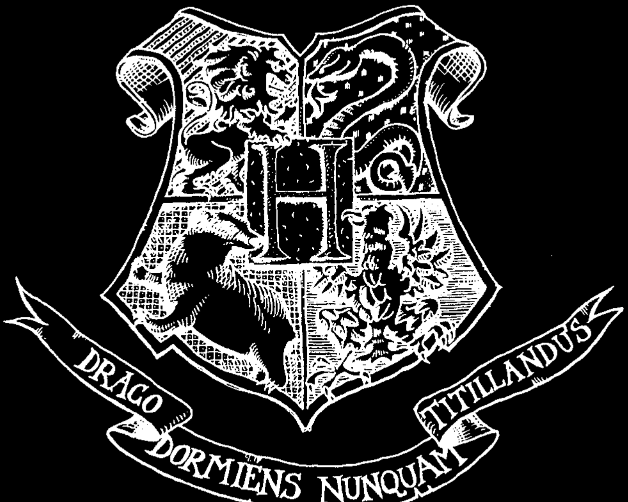
“Dinner, Nagini,” said Voldemort softly, and the great snake swayed and slithered from his shoulders onto the polished wood.

Titels verkrygbaar in die Harry Potter-reeks
(In leesvolgorde)

Harry Potter en die Towenaar se Steen
Harry Potter en die Kamer van Geheimenisse
Harry Potter en die Gevangene van Azkaban
Harry Potter en die Beker Vol Vuur
Harry Potter en die Orde van die Feniks
Harry Potter en die Halfbloed Prins
Harry Potter en die Skatte van die Dood

HARRY POTTER

en die Skatte van die Dood



J.K. Rowling

Vertaal deur Kobus Geldenhuys

Human & Rousseau
Kaapstad Pretoria

Die
opdrag
van hierdie boek
word verdeel
in sewe:
aan Neil,
aan Jessica,
aan David,
aan Kenzie,
aan Di,
aan Anne,
en aan jou,
as jy
by Harry
gestaan het
tot die
bitter
einde toe.

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O, die foltering ingebore in die ras,
die knarsende roep van die dood
en die slag wat die aar tref,
die bloeding wat niemand kan stuit, die smart,
die vloek wat geen mens kan verduur nie.

Maar daar is genesing in die huis
en nie daarbuite nie, nee,
nie van ander nie, maar van *hulle*,
hul bloedige stryd. Ons verhef ons stemme tot u,
donker gode benede die aarde.

Hoor ons, o salige ondergrondse magte –
verhoor hierdie smeking, stuur hulp.
Seën die kinders, skenk aan hulle triomf, nou.

Aischulos, *Die Plengofferdraers*

Om dood te gaan is maar net om die wêreld oor te steek, soos vriende die oseane; hulle lewe steeds in mekaar voort. Want hulle moet teenwoordig wees, dié wat liefhet en lewe in dit wat alomteenwoordig is. In hierdie goddelike spieël sien hulle mekaar van aangesig tot aangesig; en hulle omgang is vryelik, en ook suiwer. Dit is die vertroosting van vriende, dat hoewel hulle na bewering doodgaan, hulle vriendskap en samesyn, in die beste sin van die woord, altyd teenwoordig is, want dit is onsterflik.

William Penn, *More Fruits of Solitude*

Die Donker Heer Regeer

Die twee mans verskyn uit die niet, 'n paar tree uitmekaar in die smal, maanverligte laan. Hulle staan vir 'n oomblik doodstil met hulle towerstawwe op mekaar se borskasse gerig; dan herken hulle mekaar, steek hulle towerstawwe onder hulle mantels in en begin flink in dieselfde rigting loop.

"Nuus?" vra die langer een van die twee.

"Die beste," antwoord Severus Snape.

Die laan word aan die linkerkant omsoom deur wilde braambosse wat laag groei en aan die regterkant deur 'n hoë, netjies versorgde heining. Die mans se lang mantels flap om hulle enkels soos hulle aanstap.

"Gedog ek gaan dalk laat wees," sê Yaxley. Sy bot gelaatstrekke gly in en uit sig soos die oorhangende bome se takke die maanlig versper en deurlaat. "Dit was 'n bietjie moeiliker as wat ek gedink het. Maar ek hoop hy sal tevrede wees. Jy klink vol selfvertroue dat jy goed ontvang gaan word?"

Snape knik, maar brei nie uit nie. Hulle draai regs in by 'n breë oprit wat uit die laan afdraai. Die hoë heining swenk saam met hulle en strek tot in die verte verby die twee indrukwekkende smeeysterhekke wat die mans se pad versper. Nie een van die twee verslap hulle pas nie; albei lig hulle linkerarms in stilte in 'n soort saluut en beweeg reguit deur asof die donker metaal rook is.

Die taksisheining demp die geluid van die mans se voetstappe. Daar is 'n geritsel iewers aan hulle regterkant: Yaxley haal sy towerstaf weer uit en mik daarmee oor sy metgesel se kop, maar die bron van die geluid blyk niks meer te wees nie as 'n spierwit pou wat pronkend en majestueus al met die bokant van die heining langs loop.

"Lucius het nog altyd gehou van die goeie lewe. *Poue* . . ." Yaxley snork en druk sy towerstaf weer onder sy mantel in.

'n Imposante herehuis doem op uit die donker aan die einde van die reguit oprit; ligte flikker in die ruitvormige glas van die grond-

vloer se vensters. Iewers in die donker agter die heining speel daar 'n fontein. Gruis kraak onder hulle voete soos Snape en Yaxley hulle haas na die voordeur wat binnetoe oopswaai toe hulle nader kom, al het niemand dit sigbaar oopgemaak nie.

Die portaal is groot, dof verlig en weelderig versier, met 'n manjifieke tapyt wat die meeste van die klipvloer bedek. Die oë van die bleek gesigte in die portrette teen die mure volg Snape en Yaxley soos hulle verbybeweeg. Die twee mans stop voor 'n swaar houtdeur wat na die volgende vertrek toe lei, huiwer vir 'n oomblik so lank soos 'n hartklop, en dan draai Snape die bronshandvatsel.

Die sitkamer is vol stil mense wat om 'n lang, swierige tafel sit. Die meubels wat die vertrek gewoonlik vol staan, is onverskillig eenkant teen die mure geskuif. Lig word verskaf deur 'n knetterende vuur onder 'n spoggerige marmerkaggelrak waarbo daar 'n vergulde spieël hang. Snape en Yaxley talm vir 'n oomblik op die drumpel. Soos hulle oë gewoond raak aan die gebrek aan lig word hulle blik opwaarts getrek na die vreemdste aspek van die toneel: 'n skynbaar bewustelose mensfiguur wat onderstebo oor die tafel hang en stadig om en om draai asof dit aan 'n onsigbare tou hang, en weerkaats word in die spieël en die tafel se kaal, gepoleerde oppervlak. Nie een van die mense wat onder hierdie sonderlinge gesig sit, kyk daarna nie, behalwe 'n bleek jong man wat amper reg daaronder sit. Hy kry dit blykbaar nie reg om homself te keer om elke minuut of so boontoe te loer nie.

"Yaxley, Snape," sê 'n hoë, helder stem van die kop van die tafel af. "Julle is baie amper laat."

Die spreker sit direk voor die kaggel sodat dit eers vir die nuwe aankomelinge moeilik is om meer as sy silhoeët uit te maak. Maar soos hulle nader kom, skyn sy gesig deur die halfdonker: haarloos, slangagtig, met splete vir neusgate en gloeiende rooi oë met vertikale pupille. Hy is so bleek dat dit lyk of hy 'n pêrelagtige gloed uitstraal.

"Severus, hier," sê Voldemort en wys na die sitplek onmiddellik regs van hom. "Yaxley – langs Dolohof."

Die twee mans neem hulle aangewese plekke in. Die meeste van die oë om die tafel volg Snape en dit is met hom dat Voldemort eerste praat.

"So?"

"My Heer, die Orde van die Feniks beplan om Harry Potter volgende Saterdag met sononder uit sy huidige plek van veilige bewaring te verskuif."

Die belangstelling om die tafel verskerp voelbaar: party snuif, ander vroetel; almal staar na Snape en Voldemort.

"Saterdag . . . met sononder," herhaal Voldemort. Sy rooi oë pen Snape se swartes met soveel intensiteit vas dat party van die waarnemers wegkyk, skynbaar bang dat die felheid van die blik hulle sal skroei. Snape kyk egter kalm terug in Voldemort se gesig en ná 'n oomblik of twee krul Voldemort se liplose mond op in iets wat soos 'n glimlag lyk.

"Mooi. Baie mooi. En hierdie inligting kom . . ."

"Van die bron wat ons bespreek het," sê Snape.

"My Heer."

Yaxley leun vorentoe en kyk met die lang tafel af na Voldemort en Snape. Al die gesigte draai na hom toe.

"My Heer, ek het iets anders gehoor."

Yaxley wag, maar Voldemort praat nie, daarom gaan hy voort: "Dawlish, die Auror, het laat val dat Potter eers op die dertigste verskuif gaan word, die aand voor die seun sewentien word."

Snape glimlag.

"My bron het my vertel daar word beplan om 'n vals spoor te lê; dis dit. Daar is ongetwyfeld 'n Warvloek op Dawlish geplaas. Dit sal nie die eerste keer wees nie; hy is daarvoor bekend dat hy vatbaar is."

"Ek verseker u, my Heer, Dawlish het baie seker van sy saak gelyk," sê Yaxley.

"As hy geWar is, is hy natuurlik seker," sê Snape. "Ek verseker *jou*, Yaxley, die Auror-kantoor sal geen verdere rol in Harry Potter se beskerming speel nie. Die Orde glo ons het die Ministerie geïnfiltreer."

"Dan is die Orde darem oor een ding reg, nè?" sê 'n gesette man wat 'n entjie van Yaxley af sit. Hy gee 'n aamborstige giggel wat hier en daar om die tafel geëggo word.

"My Heer," gaan Yaxley verder, "Dawlish dink 'n hele groep Aurors gaan gebruik word om die seun oor te plaas –"

Voldemort lig 'n groot wit hand. Yaxley word onmiddellik stil en kyk gebelgd hoe Voldemort terug na Snape toe draai.

"Waar gaan hulle die seun vervolgens wegsteek?"

"Aan 't huis van een van die Orde," sê Snape. "Die plek, volgens die bron, is toegerus met elke moontlike beskerming wat die Orde en die Ministerie saam kan verskaf. Ek dink daar is min kans om hom te kry as hy eers daar is, my Heer, tensy die Ministerie natuurlik voor volgende Saterdag tot 'n val kom, wat miskien vir ons die geleentheid kan gee om genoeg van die towerspreuke te ontdek en tot niet te maak ten einde deur die res te breek."

"Wel, Yaxley?" roep Voldemort met die tafel af terwyl die vuur se

skynsel vreemd in sy rooi oë glinster. "*Sal* die Ministerie voor volgende Saterdag tot 'n val kom?"

Al die koppe draai weer eens. Yaxley maak sy skouers vierkantig. "My Heer, ek het goeie nuus wat dit betref. Ek het – met moeite, en ná groot inspanning – daarin geslaag om 'n Imperiusvloek op Pius Thicknesse te plaas."

Baie van diegene wat rondom Yaxley sit, lyk beïndruk; Dolohof, die man langs hom met die lang, verwronge gesig, klop hom op die rug.

"Dis 'n begin," sê Voldemort. "Maar Thicknesse is net een man. Scrimgeour moet deur ons mense omring wees voor ek optree. Een mislukte aanslag op die Minister se lewe sal vir my 'n ernstige terugslag wees."

"Ja – my Heer, dit is waar – maar weet u, as Hoof van die Departement van Magiese Wetstoepassing het Thicknesse gereeld kontak met nie net die Minister self nie, maar ook met die Hoofde van al die Ministerie se ander departemente. Ek dink dit sal maklik wees noudat so 'n hooggeplaaste amptenaar onder ons beheer is, om die ander tot onderhorigheid te dwing, en dan kan hulle almal saamwerk om Scrimgeour tot 'n val te bring."

"Solank ons vriend Thicknesse nie ontmasker word voor hy die res in ons kamp gekry het nie," sê Voldemort. "In elk geval, dit bly onwaarskynlik dat die Ministerie voor volgende Saterdag myne sal wees. As ons die seun nie by sy bestemming kan bykom nie, moet dit gedoen word terwyl hy soontoe onderweg is."

"Ons het daar 'n voordeel, my Heer," sê Yaxley wat vasberade lyk om ook goedkeuring te kry. "Ons het nou verskeie mense in die Departement van Magiese Vervoer geplant. As Potter appareer of die Floo-netwerk gebruik, sal ons onmiddellik daarvan weet."

"Hy sal nie een van die twee doen nie," sê Snape. "Die Orde vermy enige vorm van vervoer wat deur die Ministerie beheer of gereguleer word. Hulle wantrou alles wat met daardie plek te doen het."

"Des te beter," sê Voldemort. "Hy sal dan openlik vervoer moet word. Wat dit baie makliker maak om hom te onderskep."

Voldemort kyk weer op na die liggaam wat stadig in die rondte draai terwyl hy voortgaan. "Ek sal persoonlik na die seun omsien. Daar was al te veel foute sover dit Harry Potter aangaan. Party daarvan was my eie. Die feit dat Potter lewe, is meer te wyte aan my foute as aan sy seges."

Die groep om die tafel hou Voldemort behoedsaam dop; die uitdrukking op elkeen se gesig maak dit duidelik dat hulle bang is om geblameer te word dat Harry Potter nog steeds lewe. Dit lyk egter of

Voldemort meer met homself praat as met enigeen van hulle terwyl hy nog steeds die bewustelose liggaam bokant hom aanspreek.

"Ek was onverskillig en is gedwarsboom deur geluk en toeval, daardie verwoesters van alle planne wat nie deeglik beraam is nie. Maar ek weet nou van beter. Ek verstaan die dinge wat ek voorheen nie verstaan het nie. Ek moet die een wees wat Harry Potter doodmaak, en dit *sal* ek wees."

Skynbaar in reaksie op hierdie woorde klink daar skielik 'n weeklaag op, 'n aaklige, uitgerekte kreet van wanhoop en pyn. Baie van die mense om die tafel kyk verskrik af, want dit was asof die geluid van onder hulle voete uit gekom het.

"Wurmstert," sê Voldemort met geen verandering in sy stil, peinsende stemtoon nie en sonder om sy oë van die draaiende liggaam bo hulle af te haal, "het ek nie vir jou gesê om ons gevangene stil te hou nie?"

"Ja, m – my Heer," snak 'n klein mannetjie halfpad met die tafel af wat so laag in sy stoel sit dat dit met die eerste oogopslag lyk of dit onbeset is. Hy klouter nou van sy stoel af, skarrel by die vertrek uit en laat net 'n eienaardige silwer skynsel agter.

"Soos ek gesê het," gaan Voldemort voort terwyl hy weer na sy volgelinge se gespanne gesigte kyk, "ek verstaan nou beter. Ek sal byvoorbeeld by een van julle 'n towerstaf moet leen voor ek gaan om Potter dood te maak."

Die gesigte om hom verstar van skok; hy kon net sowel aangekondig het dat hy een van hulle arms wil leen.

"Geen vrywilligers nie?" vra Voldemort. "Kom ons kyk . . . Lucius, ek sien geen rede hoekom jy ná dese 'n towerstaf hoef te hê nie."

Lucius Malfoy kyk op. Sy vel lyk geel en wasagtig in die vuur se gloed en sy oë is ingesonke en versluier. Wanneer hy praat, is sy stem hees.

"My Heer?"

"Jou towerstaf, Lucius. Ek benodig jou towerstaf."

"Ek . . ."

Malfoy loer onderlangs na sy vrou. Sy staar reguit voor haar uit, net so bleek soos hy, met lang blonde hare wat teen haar rug afhang. Onder die tafel sluit haar vingers vlugtig om sy gewrig. By haar aanraking steek Malfoy sy hand onder sy kleed in, haal 'n towerstaf uit en gee dit vir Voldemort aan wat dit voor sy rooi oë ophou en dit noukeurig bestudeer.

"Wat is dit?"

"Olmhout, my Heer," fluister Malfoy.

"En die binneste?"

"Draak – draakhartsnare."

"Mooi," sê Voldemort. Hy haal sy eie towerstaf uit en vergelyk die lengtes.

Lucius Malfoy maak 'n onwillekeurige beweging; vir 'n fraksie van 'n sekonde lyk dit of hy verwag dat hy Voldemort se towerstaf in ruil vir syne gaan kry. Voldemort kyk die gebaar nie mis nie en sy oë vergroot venynig.

"My towerstaf vir jou gee, Lucius? *My* towerstaf?"

Party van die aanwesiges grinnik.

"Ek het jou jou vryheid gegee, Lucius. Is dit nie genoeg vir jou nie? Maar ek kom agter jy en jou familie lyk deesdae minder gelukkig . . . Wat is dit van my teenwoordigheid in julle huis wat julle ontevrede maak, Lucius?"

"Niks – niks nie, my Heer!"

"Sulke *leuens*, Lucius . . ."

Dit is asof die sagte stem aanhou sis selfs nadat die wrede mond ophou beweeg het. Een of twee van die towenaars kan beswaarlik 'n siddering onderdruk soos die gesis harder word; almal hoor hoe iets swaars oor die vloer onder die tafel gly.

Die reuseslang verskyn en seil stadig teen Voldemort se stoel op. Sy verrys skynbaar eindeloos en kom tot rus oor Voldemort se skouers. Haar nek is so dik soos 'n man se dy; haar oë het vertikale splete vir pupille en knip nie. Voldemort streel die dierasie ingedagte met lang, dun vingers terwyl hy steeds na Lucius Malfoy kyk.

"Hoekom lyk die Malfoys so ongelukkig met hulle lot? Is my opgang tot mag nie die einste ding wat julle al soveel jaar voorgee om te begeer nie?"

"Natuurlik, my Heer," sê Lucius Malfoy. Sy hand bewe soos hy die sweet van sy bolip afvee. "Ons het dit begeer – ons begeer dit nog steeds."

Links van Malfoy gee sy vrou 'n vreemde, stywe knik terwyl sy van Voldemort en die slang af wegkyk. Regs van hom loer sy seun, Draco, wat na die beweginglose liggaam opgestaar het, vinnig na Voldemort en dan weer weg, vreesbevange om oogkontak te maak.

"My Heer," sê 'n donker vrou halfpad met die tafel af in 'n stem wat skor is van emosie, "dit is 'n eer om u hier te hê, hier in ons familie se huis. Daar kan geen groter vreugde wees nie."

Sy sit langs haar suster, so verskillend van haar wat die uiterlike betref met haar donker hare en swaar ooglede as in haar houding en gedrag; Narcissa sit onbeweeglik en strak, Bellatrix leun oor na Vol-

demort toe, want blote woorde kan nie uitdrukking gee aan haar begeerte om naby aan hom te wees nie.

"Geen groter vreugde nie," herhaal Voldemort en sy kop draai effens eenkant toe soos hy Bellatrix betrag. "Dit beteken baie, komende van jou."

Haar gesig verkleur en trane van blydskap wel in haar oë op. "My Heer weet ek praat niks anders as die waarheid nie!"

"Geen groter vreugde nie . . . selfs vergeleke met die heuglike gebeurtenis wat ek hoor hierdie week in jou familie plaasgevind het?"

Sy staar na hom, haar lippe uitmekaar, duidelik verward. "Ek weet nie wat u bedoel nie, my Heer."

"Ek praat van jou niggie, Bellatrix. En julle s'n, Lucius en Narcissa. Sy is so pas met die weerwolf, Remus Lupin, getroud. Julle moet so trots wees."

'n Koggelende gelag bars om die tafel los. Baie leun vorentoe om leedvermakerig kyke uit te ruil; 'n paar slaan met hulle vuiste op die tafel. Die groot slang hou nie daarvan dat haar rus versteur word nie; sy maak haar mond wyd oop en sis kwaad, maar die Doodseters hoor dit nie, so verheug is hulle oor Bellatrix en die Malfoys se vernedering. Bellatrix se gesig, wat netnou nog warm was van vreugde, verander nou in 'n lelike, vlekkerige rooi.

"Sy is nie ons niggie nie, my Heer!" roep sy bo die uitbundige vrolikheid uit. "Ons – ek en Narcissa – het ons suster nog nie met 'n oog gesien vandat sy met die Modderbloed getroud is nie. Daardie snuiter het niks met een van ons twee te doen nie, en ook nie enige monster met wie sy trou nie."

"Wat sê jy, Draco?" vra Voldemort, en al is sy stem sag, is dit duidelik hoorbaar bo die gejou en gespot. "Sal jy hulle werpsel oppas?"

Die uitbundigheid styg; Draco Malfoy kyk vreesbevange na sy pa wat na sy eie skoot afstaar en vang dan sy ma se oë. Sy skud haar kop amper onmerkbaar en staar dan weer uitdrukkingloos na die oorkantste muur.

"Genoeg," sê Voldemort terwyl hy die kwaai slang streel. "Genoeg."

En die gelag hou onmiddellik op.

"Baie van ons oudste stambome word oor die jare effens sieklik," sê hy terwyl Bellatrix hom asemloos en pleitend aanstaar. "Julle moet julle s'n snoei, dink julle nie, om dit gesond te hou? Sny daardie dele af wat die res se gesondheid bedreig."

"Ja, my Heer," fluister Bellatrix en haar oë swem weer in trane van dankbaarheid. "By die eerste die beste geleentheid!"

"Jy sal dit kry," sê Voldemort. "En soos met julle familie, so ook met die wêreld . . . Ons sal die pes wat ons besmet, wegsny totdat slegs diegene met die suiwer bloed agterbly . . ."

Voldemort lig Lucius Malfoy se towerstaf, rig dit direk op die hangende liggaam wat stadig bo die tafel draai en swiep dit liggies. Die figuur word met 'n kreun lewend en begin spartel teen onsigbare boeie.

"Herken jy ons gas, Severus?" vra Voldemort.

Snape lig sy oë na die onderstebo gesig. Al die Doodseters kyk nou op na die gevangene asof hulle toestemming gekry het om te wys hoe nuuskierig hulle is. Terwyl sy na die vuur se skynsel toe draai, sê die vrou in 'n krakende en vreesbevange stem: "Severus! Help my!"

"A, ja," sê Snape soos die gevangene stadig weer wegdraai.

"En jy, Draco?" vra Voldemort wat die slang se snoet met sy los hand streel. Draco skud sy kop rukkerig. Noudat die vrou wakker geword het, is dit asof hy nie meer na haar kan kyk nie.

"Maar jy sou nie by haar klas gehad het nie," sê Voldemort. "Vir dié van julle wat nie weet nie, ons het vanaand vir Charity Burbage hier wat tot onlangs nog by Hogwarts Skool vir Towerkuns en Heksery onderwys gegee het."

Daar is klein geluidjies van begrip om die tafel. 'n Breë, kromgetrekte vrou met gepunte tande giggel.

"Ja . . . Professor Burbage het vir hekse en towenaars se kinders alles van Moggels geleer . . . Hoe hulle nie soveel van ons verskil nie . . ."

Een van die Doodseters spoeg op die vloer. Charity Burbage draai weer tot sy Snape kan sien.

"Severus . . . asseblief . . . asseblief . . ."

"Stilte," sê Voldemort. Hy swiep Malfoy se towerstaf weer en Charity word stil asof haar mond gesnoer is. "Asof dit nie genoeg was dat sy towerkinders se gedagtes gekorrupteer en besoedel het nie, het professor Burbage verlede week 'n vurige betoog ter verdediging van Modderbloede in die *Daaglikse Profeet* geskryf. Sy sê towenaars moet daardie diewe van hul kennis en towerkrag aanvaar. Volgens professor Burbage is die afname in suiwerbloede 'n wenslike toedrag van sake . . . Sy wil hê ons almal moet met Moggels paar . . . of, altemit, weerwolwe . . ."

Niemand lag hierdie keer nie: die woede en veragting in Voldemort se stem is onmiskenbaar. Charity Burbage draai vir die derde keer tot voor Snape. Trane stroom uit haar oë tot in haar hare. Snape kyk terug na haar sonder om 'n spier te verroer, terwyl sy weer stadig van hom af wegdraai.

"Avada Kedavra."

Die flitsende groen lig verlig elke hoek van die vertrek. Charity val met 'n weergalmende slag op die tafel wat bewe en kraak. 'n Hele paar van die Doodseters ruk terug in hulle stoele. Draco val uit syne op die vloer.

"Aandete, Nagini," sê Voldemort sag en die groot slang seil slingerend van sy skouers af tot op die gepoleerde hout.

CHAPTER TWO



IN MEMORIAM

Harry was bleeding. Clutching his right hand in his left and swearing under his breath, he shouldered open his bedroom door. There was a crunch of breaking china: He had trodden on a cup of cold tea that had been sitting on the floor outside his bedroom door.

"What the — ?"

He looked around; the landing of number four, Privet Drive, was deserted. Possibly the cup of tea was Dudley's idea of a clever booby trap. Keeping his bleeding hand elevated, Harry scraped the fragments of cup together with the other hand and threw them into the already crammed bin just visible inside his bedroom door. Then he tramped across to the bathroom to run his finger under the tap.

It was stupid, pointless, irritating beyond belief that he still had four days left of being unable to perform magic . . . but he had to admit to himself that this jagged cut in his finger would have defeated him. He had never learned how to repair wounds, and now he came to think of it — particularly in light of his immediate plans — this seemed a serious flaw in his magical education. Making a mental note to ask Hermione how it was done, he used a large wad of toilet paper to mop up as much of the tea as he could, before returning to his bedroom and slamming the door behind him.

Harry had spent the morning completely emptying his school trunk for the first time since he had packed it six years ago. At the start of the intervening school years, he had merely skimmed off the topmost three quarters of the contents and replaced or updated them, leaving a layer of general debris at the bottom — old quills, desiccated beetle eyes, single socks that no longer fit. Minutes previously, Harry had plunged his hand into this mulch, experienced a stabbing pain in the fourth finger of his right hand, and withdrawn it to see a lot of blood.

He now proceeded a little more cautiously. Kneeling down beside the trunk again, he groped around in the bottom and, after retrieving an old badge that flickered feebly between *SUPPORT CEDRIC DIGGORY* and *POTTER STINKS*, a cracked and worn-out Sneakoscope, and a gold locket inside which a note signed R.A.B. had been hidden, he finally discovered the sharp edge that had done the damage. He recognized it at once. It was a two-inch-long fragment of the enchanted mirror that his dead godfather, Sirius, had given him. Harry laid it aside and felt cautiously around the trunk for the rest, but nothing more remained of his godfather's last gift except

powdered glass, which clung to the deepest layer of debris like glittering grit.

Harry sat up and examined the jagged piece on which he had cut himself, seeing nothing but his own bright green eye reflected back at him. Then he placed the fragment on top of that morning's *Daily Prophet*, which lay unread on the bed, and attempted to stem the sudden upsurge of bitter memories, the stabs of regret and of longing the discovery of the broken mirror had occasioned, by attacking the rest of the rubbish in the trunk.

It took another hour to empty it completely, throw away the useless items, and sort the remainder in piles according to whether or not he would need them from now on. His school and Quidditch robes, cauldron, parchment, quills, and most of his textbooks were piled in a corner, to be left behind. He wondered what his aunt and uncle would do with them; burn them in the dead of night, probably, as if they were the evidence of some dreadful crime. His Muggle clothing, Invisibility Cloak, potion-making kit, certain books, the photograph album Hagrid had once given him, a stack of letters, and his wand had been repacked into an old rucksack. In a front pocket were the Marauder's Map and the locket with the note signed R.A.B. inside it. The locket was accorded this place of honor not because it was valuable — in all usual senses it was worthless — but because of what it had cost to attain it.

This left a sizable stack of newspapers sitting on his desk beside his snowy owl, Hedwig: one for each of the days Harry had spent at Privet Drive this summer.

He got up off the floor, stretched, and moved across to his desk.

Hedwig made no movement as he began to flick through the newspapers, throwing them onto the rubbish pile one by one. The owl was asleep, or else faking; she was angry with Harry about the limited amount of time she was allowed out of her cage at the moment.

As he neared the bottom of the pile of newspapers, Harry slowed down, searching for one particular issue that he knew had arrived shortly after he had returned to Privet Drive for the summer; he remembered that there had been a small mention on the front about the resignation of Charity Burbage, the Muggle Studies teacher at Hogwarts. At last he found it. Turning to page ten, he sank into his desk chair and reread the article he had been looking for.

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE REMEMBERED

by Elphias Doge



I met Albus Dumbledore at the age of eleven, on our first day at Hogwarts. Our mutual attraction was undoubtedly due to the fact that we both felt ourselves to be outsiders. I had contracted dragon pox shortly before arriving at school, and while I was no longer contagious, my pockmarked visage and greenish hue did not encourage many to approach me. For his part, Albus had arrived at Hogwarts under the burden of unwanted notoriety. Scarcely a year previously, his father, Percival, had been convicted of a savage and well-publicized attack upon three young Muggles.

Albus never attempted to deny that his father (who was to die in Azkaban) had committed this crime; on the contrary, when I

plucked up courage to ask him, he assured me that he knew his father to be guilty. Beyond that, Dumbledore refused to speak of the sad business, though many attempted to make him do so. Some, indeed, were disposed to praise his father's action and assumed that Albus too was a Muggle-hater. They could not have been more mistaken: As anybody who knew Albus would attest, he never revealed the remotest anti-Muggle tendency. Indeed, his determined support for Muggle rights gained him many enemies in subsequent years.

In a matter of months, however, Albus's own fame had begun to eclipse that of his father. By the end of his first year he would never again be known as the son of a Muggle-hater, but as nothing more or less than the most brilliant student ever seen at the school. Those of us who were privileged to be his friends benefited from his example, not to mention his help and encouragement, with which he was always generous. He confessed to me in later life that he knew even then that his greatest pleasure lay in teaching.

He not only won every prize of note that the school offered, he was soon in regular correspondence with the most notable magical names of the day, including Nicolas Flamel, the celebrated alchemist; Bathilda Bagshot, the noted historian; and Adalbert Waffling, the magical theoretician. Several of his papers found their way into learned publications such as *Transfiguration Today, Challenges in Charming,* and *The Practical Potioneer.* Dumbledore's future career seemed likely to be meteoric, and the only question that remained was when he

would become Minister of Magic. Though it was often predicted in later years that he was on the point of taking the job, however, he never had Ministerial ambitions.

Three years after we had started at Hogwarts, Albus's brother, Aberforth, arrived at school. They were not alike; Aberforth was never bookish and, unlike Albus, preferred to settle arguments by dueling rather than through reasoned discussion. However, it is quite wrong to suggest, as some have, that the brothers were not friends. They rubbed along as comfortably as two such different boys could do. In fairness to Aberforth, it must be admitted that living in Albus's shadow cannot have been an altogether comfortable experience. Being continually outshone was an occupational hazard of being his friend and cannot have been any more pleasurable as a brother.

When Albus and I left Hogwarts we intended to take the then-traditional tour of the world together, visiting and observing foreign wizards, before pursuing our separate careers. However, tragedy intervened. On the very eve of our trip, Albus's mother, Kendra, died, leaving Albus the head, and sole breadwinner, of the family. I postponed my departure long enough to pay my respects at Kendra's funeral, then left for what was now to be a solitary journey. With a younger brother and sister to care for, and little gold left to them, there could no longer be any question of Albus accompanying me.

That was the period of our lives when we had least contact. I wrote to Albus, describing, perhaps insensitively, the wonders of my journey, from narrow escapes from chimaeras in Greece

to the experiments of the Egyptian alchemists. His letters told me little of his day-to-day life, which I guessed to be frustratingly dull for such a brilliant wizard. Immersed in my own experiences, it was with horror that I heard, toward the end of my year's travels, that yet another tragedy had struck the Dumbledores: the death of his sister, Ariana.

Though Ariana had been in poor health for a long time, the blow, coming so soon after the loss of their mother, had a profound effect on both of her brothers. All those closest to Albus — and I count myself one of that lucky number — agree that Ariana's death, and Albus's feeling of personal responsibility for it (though, of course, he was guiltless), left their mark upon him forevermore.

I returned home to find a young man who had experienced a much older person's suffering. Albus was more reserved than before, and much less lighthearted. To add to his misery, the loss of Ariana had led, not to a renewed closeness between Albus and Aberforth, but to an estrangement. (In time this would lift — in later years they reestablished, if not a close relationship, then certainly a cordial one.) However, he rarely spoke of his parents or of Ariana from then on, and his friends learned not to mention them.

Other quills will describe the triumphs of the following years. Dumbledore's innumerable contributions to the store of Wizarding knowledge, including his discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, will benefit generations to come, as will the wisdom he displayed in the many judgments he made while

Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. They say, still, that no Wizarding duel ever matched that between Dumbledore and Grindelwald in 1945. Those who witnessed it have written of the terror and the awe they felt as they watched these two extraordinary wizards do battle. Dumbledore's triumph, and its consequences for the Wizarding world, are considered a turning point in magical history to match the introduction of the International Statute of Secrecy or the downfall of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Albus Dumbledore was never proud or vain; he could find something to value in anyone, however apparently insignificant or wretched, and I believe that his early losses endowed him with great humanity and sympathy. I shall miss his friendship more than I can say, but my loss is as nothing compared to the Wizarding world's. That he was the most inspiring and the best loved of all Hogwarts headmasters cannot be in question. He died as he lived: working always for the greater good and, to his last hour, as willing to stretch out a hand to a small boy with dragon pox as he was on the day that I met him.

Harry finished reading but continued to gaze at the picture accompanying the obituary. Dumbledore was wearing his familiar, kindly smile, but as he peered over the top of his half-moon spectacles, he gave the impression, even in newsprint, of X-raying Harry, whose sadness mingled with a sense of humiliation.

He had thought he knew Dumbledore quite well, but ever since reading this obituary he had been forced to recognize that he had barely known him at all. Never once had he imagined Dumbledore's

childhood or youth; it was as though he had sprung into being as Harry had known him, venerable and silver-haired and old. The idea of a teenage Dumbledore was simply odd, like trying to imagine a stupid Hermione or a friendly Blast-Ended Skrewt.

He had never thought to ask Dumbledore about his past. No doubt it would have felt strange, impertinent even, but after all, it had been common knowledge that Dumbledore had taken part in that legendary duel with Grindelwald, and Harry had not thought to ask Dumbledore what that had been like, nor about any of his other famous achievements. No, they had always discussed Harry, Harry's past, Harry's future, Harry's plans . . . and it seemed to Harry now, despite the fact that his future was so dangerous and so uncertain, that he had missed irreplaceable opportunities when he had failed to ask Dumbledore more about himself, even though the only personal question he had ever asked his headmaster was also the only one he suspected that Dumbledore had not answered honestly:

"What do you see when you look in the mirror?"

"I? I see myself holding a pair of thick, woolen socks."

After several minutes' thought, Harry tore the obituary out of the *Prophet*, folded it carefully, and tucked it inside the first volume of *Practical Defensive Magic and Its Use Against the Dark Arts*. Then he threw the rest of the newspaper onto the rubbish pile and turned to face the room. It was much tidier. The only things left out of place were today's *Daily Prophet*, still lying on the bed, and on top of it, the piece of broken mirror.

Harry moved across the room, slid the mirror fragment off today's *Prophet*, and unfolded the newspaper. He had merely glanced at the

headline when he had taken the rolled-up paper from the delivery owl early that morning and thrown it aside, after noting that it said nothing about Voldemort. Harry was sure that the Ministry was leaning on the *Prophet* to suppress news about Voldemort. It was only now, therefore, that he saw what he had missed.

Across the bottom half of the front page a smaller headline was set over a picture of Dumbledore striding along looking harried:

DUMBLEDORE — THE TRUTH AT LAST?

> Coming next week, the shocking story of the flawed genius considered by many to be the greatest wizard of his generation. Stripping away the popular image of serene, silver-bearded wisdom, Rita Skeeter reveals the disturbed childhood, the lawless youth, the lifelong feuds, and the guilty secrets that Dumbledore carried to his grave. WHY was the man tipped to be Minister of Magic content to remain a mere headmaster? WHAT was the real purpose of the secret organization known as the Order of the Phoenix? HOW did Dumbledore really meet his end?
>
> The answers to these and many more questions are explored in the explosive new biography, *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*, by Rita Skeeter, exclusively interviewed by Betty Braithwaite, page 13, inside.

Harry ripped open the paper and found page thirteen. The article was topped with a picture showing another familiar face: a woman wearing jeweled glasses with elaborately curled blonde hair, her teeth bared in what was clearly supposed to be a winning smile,

wiggling her fingers up at him. Doing his best to ignore this nauseating image, Harry read on.

In person, Rita Skeeter is much warmer and softer than her famously ferocious quill-portraits might suggest. Greeting me in the hallway of her cozy home, she leads me straight into the kitchen for a cup of tea, a slice of pound cake and, it goes without saying, a steaming vat of freshest gossip.

"Well, of course, Dumbledore is a biographer's dream," says Skeeter. "Such a long, full life. I'm sure my book will be the first of very, very many."

Skeeter was certainly quick off the mark. Her nine-hundred-page book was completed a mere four weeks after Dumbledore's mysterious death in June. I ask her how she managed this superfast feat.

"Oh, when you've been a journalist as long as I have, working to a deadline is second nature. I knew that the Wizarding world was clamoring for the full story and I wanted to be the first to meet that need."

I mention the recent, widely publicized remarks of Elphias Doge, Special Advisor to the Wizengamot and longstanding friend of Albus Dumbledore's, that "Skeeter's book contains less fact than a Chocolate Frog card."

Skeeter throws back her head and laughs.

"Darling Dodgy! I remember interviewing him a few years back about merpeople rights, bless him. Completely gaga, seemed to think we were sitting at the bottom of Lake

Windermere, kept telling me to watch out for trout."

And yet Elphias Doge's accusations of inaccuracy have been echoed in many places. Does Skeeter really feel that four short weeks have been enough to gain a full picture of Dumbledore's long and extraordinary life?

"Oh, my dear," beams Skeeter, rapping me affectionately across the knuckles, "you know as well as I do how much information can be generated by a fat bag of Galleons, a refusal to hear the word 'no,' and a nice sharp Quick-Quotes Quill! People were queuing to dish the dirt on Dumbledore anyway. Not everyone thought he was so wonderful, you know — he trod on an awful lot of important toes. But old Dodgy Doge can get off his high hippogriff, because I've had access to a source most journalists would swap their wands for, one who has never spoken in public before and who was close to Dumbledore during the most turbulent and disturbing phase of his youth."

The advance publicity for Skeeter's biography has certainly suggested that there will be shocks in store for those who believe Dumbledore to have led a blameless life. What were the biggest surprises she uncovered, I ask?

"Now, come off it, Betty, I'm not giving away all the highlights before anybody's bought the book!" laughs Skeeter. "But I can promise that anybody who still thinks Dumbledore was white as his beard is in for a rude awakening! Let's just say that nobody hearing him rage against You-Know-Who would have dreamed that he dabbled in the Dark Arts himself in his youth! And for a wizard who spent his later years pleading for

tolerance, he wasn't exactly broad-minded when he was younger! Yes, Albus Dumbledore had an extremely murky past, not to mention that very fishy family, which he worked so hard to keep hushed up."

I ask whether Skeeter is referring to Dumbledore's brother, Aberforth, whose conviction by the Wizengamot for misuse of magic caused a minor scandal fifteen years ago.

"Oh, Aberforth is just the tip of the dung heap," laughs Skeeter. "No, no, I'm talking about much worse than a brother with a fondness for fiddling about with goats, worse even than the Muggle-maiming father — Dumbledore couldn't keep either of them quiet anyway, they were both charged by the Wizengamot. No, it's the mother and the sister that intrigued me, and a little digging uncovered a positive nest of nastiness — but, as I say, you'll have to wait for chapters nine to twelve for full details. All I can say now is, it's no wonder Dumbledore never talked about how his nose got broken."

Family skeletons notwithstanding, does Skeeter deny the brilliance that led to Dumbledore's many magical discoveries?

"He had brains," she concedes, "although many now question whether he could really take full credit for all of his supposed achievements. As I reveal in chapter sixteen, Ivor Dillonsby claims he had already discovered eight uses of dragon's blood when Dumbledore 'borrowed' his papers."

But the importance of some of Dumbledore's achievements cannot, I venture, be denied. What of his famous defeat of Grindelwald?

"Oh, now, I'm glad you mentioned Grindelwald," says Skeeter with a tantalizing smile. "I'm afraid those who go dewy-eyed over Dumbledore's spectacular victory must brace themselves for a bombshell — or perhaps a Dungbomb. Very dirty business indeed. All I'll say is, don't be so sure that there really was the spectacular duel of legend. After they've read my book, people may be forced to conclude that Grindelwald simply conjured a white handkerchief from the end of his wand and came quietly!"

Skeeter refuses to give any more away on this intriguing subject, so we turn instead to the relationship that will undoubtedly fascinate her readers more than any other.

"Oh yes," says Skeeter, nodding briskly, "I devote an entire chapter to the whole Potter–Dumbledore relationship. It's been called unhealthy, even sinister. Again, your readers will have to buy my book for the whole story, but there is no question that Dumbledore took an unnatural interest in Potter from the word go. Whether that was really in the boy's best interests — well, we'll see. It's certainly an open secret that Potter has had a most troubled adolescence."

I ask whether Skeeter is still in touch with Harry Potter, whom she so famously interviewed last year: a breakthrough piece in which Potter spoke exclusively of his conviction that You-Know-Who had returned.

"Oh, yes, we've developed a close bond," says Skeeter. "Poor Potter has few real friends, and we met at one of the most testing moments of his life — the Triwizard Tournament. I am

probably one of the only people alive who can say that they know the real Harry Potter."

Which leads us neatly to the many rumors still circulating about Dumbledore's final hours. Does Skeeter believe that Potter was there when Dumbledore died?

"Well, I don't want to say too much — it's all in the book — but eyewitnesses inside Hogwarts castle saw Potter running away from the scene moments after Dumbledore fell, jumped, or was pushed. Potter later gave evidence against Severus Snape, a man against whom he has a notorious grudge. Is everything as it seems? That is for the Wizarding community to decide — once they've read my book."

On that intriguing note, I take my leave. There can be no doubt that Skeeter has quilled an instant bestseller. Dumbledore's legions of admirers, meanwhile, may well be trembling at what is soon to emerge about their hero.

Harry reached the bottom of the article, but continued to stare blankly at the page. Revulsion and fury rose in him like vomit; he balled up the newspaper and threw it, with all his force, at the wall, where it joined the rest of the rubbish heaped around his overflowing bin.

He began to stride blindly around the room, opening empty drawers and picking up books only to replace them on the same piles, barely conscious of what he was doing, as random phrases from Rita's article echoed in his head: *An entire chapter to the whole Potter–Dumbledore relationship . . . It's been called unhealthy,*

even sinister. . . . He dabbled in the Dark Arts himself in his youth . . . I've had access to a source most journalists would swap their wands for . . .

"Lies!" Harry bellowed, and through the window he saw the next-door neighbor, who had paused to restart his lawn mower, look up nervously.

Harry sat down hard on the bed. The broken bit of mirror danced away from him; he picked it up and turned it over in his fingers, thinking, thinking of Dumbledore and the lies with which Rita Skeeter was defaming him. . . .

A flash of brightest blue. Harry froze, his cut finger slipping on the jagged edge of the mirror again. He had imagined it, he must have done. He glanced over his shoulder, but the wall was a sickly peach color of Aunt Petunia's choosing: There was nothing blue there for the mirror to reflect. He peered into the mirror fragment again, and saw nothing but his own bright green eye looking back at him.

He had imagined it, there was no other explanation; imagined it, because he had been thinking of his dead headmaster. If anything was certain, it was that the bright blue eyes of Albus Dumbledore would never pierce him again.

— HOOFSTUK TWEE —

In Memoriam

Harry bloei. Hy hou sy regterhand styf in sy linkerhand vas en vloek saggies terwyl hy sy kamerdeur met sy skouer oopstoot. Daar is 'n geknars van porselein wat breek: hy het op 'n koppie koue tee wat op die vloer buite sy kamerdeur gestaan het, getrap.

"Wat de –"

Hy kyk rond; Ligusterlaan 4 se trapportaal is verlate. Miskien was die koppie tee Dudley se idee van 'n slim poets. Harry hou sy bloeiende hand in die lug, krap die koppieskerwe met sy ander hand bymekaar en gooi dit in die reeds oorvol vullisblik wat net sigbaar is aan die binnekant van sy kamerdeur. Dan strompel hy badkamer toe om sy vinger onder die kraan te hou.

Dit is simpel, nutteloos, ongelooflik irriterend, dat daar nog vier dae oor is wat hy nie toorkuns mag beoefen nie . . . maar hy moet aan homself erken dat die lelike sny aan sy vinger hom sou ondergekry het. Hy het nooit geleer hoe om wonde te genees nie en noudat hy daaraan dink – veral in die lig van sy onmiddellike planne – is dit 'n ernstige tekortkoming in sy towerkragopvoeding. Hy sê vir homself hy moet onthou om Hermione te vra hoe dit gedoen word en gebruik 'n hand vol toiletpapier om soveel moontlik van die tee op te vee voor hy na sy kamer teruggaan en die deur agter hom toeslaan.

Harry was die oggend besig om sy skooltrommel heeltemal leeg te maak – die eerste keer vandat hy dit ses jaar gelede gepak het. In die skooljare sedertdien het hy net die boonste driekwart van die inhoud uitgehaal en dit vervang of aangevul, en 'n laag algemene rommel het onderin agtergebly – ou veerpenne, uitgedroogde keweroë, sokkies wat te klein is. Minute vantevore het Harry sy hand by hierdie deurmekaarspul ingedruk, 'n steekpyn in sy regterhand se vierde vinger gevoel, dit uitgetrek en 'n klomp bloed gesien.

Hy gaan nou versigtiger te werk. Hy kniel langs die trommel, voel onderin rond, kry 'n ou kenteken wat flou flikker tussen *Onder-*

stem CEDRIC DIGGORY en POTTER STINK, 'n gekraakte en gehawende Loerskoop en 'n goue hangertjie waarin 'n nota geteken "R.A.B." weggesteek is, en ontdek dan uiteindelik die skerp snykant wat die skade aangerig het. Hy herken dit onmiddellik. Dit is 'n twee duim lange skerf van die betowerde spieël wat sy oorlede peetpa, Sirius, vir hom gegee het. Harry sit dit eenkant neer en voel versigtig in die trommel rond na die res daarvan, maar al wat van sy peetpa se laaste geskenk oorbly, is verpoeierde glas wat soos glinsterende gruis aan die diepste laag van die gemors vaskleef.

Harry sit regop en bekyk die ongelyke stuk waaraan hy hom gesny het; hy sien niks behalwe sy eie heldergroen oog wat na hom teruggweerkaats word nie. Dan sit hy die skerf neer op die oggend se *Daaglikse Profeet* wat ongelees op die bed lê en probeer die skielike opwelling van bitter herinneringe, die wroegings van berou en verlange wat die ontdekking van die gebreekte spieël ontketen het, deur die res van die gemors in die trommel te takel.

Dit neem nog 'n uur om dit heeltemal leeg te maak, al die nuttelose goed weg te gooi en die res in hopies uit te sorteer na gelang van of hy dit in die toekoms gaan nodig kry of nie. Sy skool- en Kwiddiekklede, hekseketel, perkament, veerpenne en die meeste van sy handboeke lê in 'n hoek opgestapel om agtergelaat te word. Hy wonder wat sy tante en oom daarmee gaan doen. Hulle sal dit seker in die middel van die nag verbrand asof dit bewysstukke van 'n afgryslike misdaad is. Sy Moggelklere, Onsigbaarheidsmantel, towerdrankietoerusting, sekere boeke, die fotoalbum wat Hagrid eenkeer vir hom gegee het, 'n stapel briewe en sy towerstaf is reeds in 'n ou rugsak gepak. In die voorste sakkie is die Plunderaar se Kaart en die hangertjie met die nota geteken "R.A.B.". Die hangertjie het hierdie ereplek nie gekry omdat dit waardevol is nie – dit is vir alle praktiese doeleindes waardeloos – maar as gevolg van wat dit gekos het om dit in die hande te kry.

Daar lê verder nog 'n aansienlike stapel koerante op sy lessenaar langs sy sneeu-uil, Hedwig: een vir elkeen van die dae wat Harry hierdie somervakansie in Ligusterlaan deurgebring het.

Hy staan van die vloer af op, strek hom uit en beweeg na sy lessenaar toe. Hedwig roer nie terwyl hy begin om vinnig deur die koerante te blaai en hulle een vir een op die rommelhoop te gooi. Die uil slaap, of maak of sy slaap; sy is vies vir Harry omdat sy op die oomblik net vir kort tydjies uit haar hok gelaat word.

Wanneer hy naby die onderkant van die stapel koerante kom, gaan Harry stadiger te werk. Hy soek na een spesifieke uitgawe wat hy weet hier afgelewer is kort nadat hy vir die somervakansie terug

Ligusterlaan toe gekom het; hy onthou daar is kortliks op die voorblad genoem dat Charity Burbage, Hogwarts se Moggelstudies-onderwyser, bedank het. Hy kry dit uiteindelik, blaai na bladsy tien en sink dan in sy lessenaar se stoel neer en lees weer die artikel waarna hy gesoek het.

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE SOOS EK HOM ONTHOU deur Elphias Doge

Ek het Albus Dumbledore op elfjarige ouderdom ontmoet, op ons eerste dag by Hogwarts. Ons aangetrokkenheid tot mekaar was ongetwyfeld te danke aan die feit dat ons albei soos buitestanders gevoel het. Ek het kort voor ek by die skool aangeland het, draakpokkies gekry, en al was dit nie meer aansteeklik nie, het die pokmerke op my gesig en my groenerige kleur min mense aangemoedig om kennis te maak. Wat Albus betref: hy het onder die juk van ongewenste berugtheid by Hogwarts aangekom. Sy vader, Percival, is skaars 'n jaar vantevore skuldig bevind aan 'n barbaarse aanval op drie jong Moggels waaraan baie publisiteit gegee is.

Albus het nooit probeer ontken dat sy vader (wat in Azkaban sou sterf) hierdie misdaad gepleeg het nie; inteendeel, toe ek die moed bymekaarskraap om hom te vra, het hy my verseker hy weet sy vader is skuldig. Dumbledore het geweier om meer as dit oor die hartseer aangeleentheid te sê, al het baie probeer om hom uit te lok. Party was inderdaad geneig om sy vader se optrede te loof en het aanvaar dat Dumbledore ook 'n Moggelhater is. Hulle kon nie meer verkeerd gewees het nie: soos wat enigiemand wat Albus geken het, kan getuig, het hy nooit die geringste anti-Moggelse neigings openbaar nie. Sy onwrikbare ondersteuning van Moggelregte het hom inderdaad in die daaropvolgende jare baie vyande besorg.

Binne 'n kwessie van maande het Albus se eie roem egter begin om sy vader s'n te oortref. Teen die einde van sy eerste jaar sou hy nooit weer as die seun van 'n Moggelhater bekend wees nie, maar as niks meer of minder nie as die briljantste student wat die skool nog ooit gehad het. Diegene van ons wat bevoorreg was om sy vriende te wees, het gebaat by sy voorbeeld, om nie te praat van sy hulp en aanmoediging waarmee hy altyd so vrygewig was nie. Hy het in sy latere lewe aan my erken dat hy selfs toe al geweet het sy grootste vreugde lê daarin om te onderrig.

Hy het nie net elke noemenswaardige prys wat die skool toegeken het, gewen nie, maar ook spoedig gereeld gekorrespondeer met die mees vooraanstaande towenaars van daardie tyd, insluitende Nicolas Flamel, die gevierde alchemis, Bathilda Bagshot, die befaamde historikus en Adalbert Waffling, die magiese teoretikus. Verskeie van sy verhandelinge is op-

geneem in vakpublikasies, byvoorbeeld Transfigurasie Teenswoordig, Uitdagings in Towerkuns en Die Praktiese Paljasmaker. Dit het gelyk of Dumbledore se toekomstige loopbaan meteories sou wees, en die enigste vraag wat oorgebly het, was wanneer hy Minister van Towerkuns sou word. Hoewel daar dikwels in later jare voorspel is dat hy op die punt was om hierdie amp te betree, het hy nooit ministeriële ambisies gehad nie.

Drie jaar nadat ons by Hogwarts begin het, het Albus se broer, Aberforth, by die skool aangekom. Hulle het baie van mekaar verskil; Aberforth was nooit lief vir boeke nie en anders as Albus, het hy verkies om argumente met tweegevegte eerder as deur beredeneerde bespreking te besleg. Dit is egter heeltemal verkeerd om, soos sommige, te beweer dat die broers nie vriende was nie. Hulle het so gemaklik oor die weg gekom as wat twee sulke uiteenlopende seuns maar kon. Billikheidshalwe moet 'n mens erken dat dit nie altyd vir Aberforth so maklik kon gewees het om in Albus se skaduwee te lewe nie. Om voortdurend oortref te word, was 'n beroepsrisiko as jy sy vriend was en dit kon geensins aangenamer gewees het as jy sy broer was nie.

Toe ek en Albus by Hogwarts weg is, het ons beplan om saam op die destyds tradisionele toer om die wêreld te gaan en buitelandse towenaars te besoek en te bestudeer voor ons ons onderskeie loopbane sou volg. Toe vind daar egter 'n tragedie plaas. Op die vooraand van ons reis is Albus se moeder, Kendra, oorlede. Albus was skielik die gesin se hoof en enigste broodwinner. Ek het my vertrek lank genoeg uitgestel om my simpatie by Kendra se begrafnis te betoon en het daarna vertrek op wat toe 'n eenmansreis sou wees. Met 'n jonger broer en suster om voor te sorg en weinig goud wat vir hulle agtergelaat is, was dit nou buite die kwessie vir Dumbledore om my te vergesel.

Dit was die tydperk in ons lewe wat ons die minste kontak gehad het. Ek het vir Albus geskryf en, miskien onsensitief, al die wonders van my reis beskryf – van noue ontkomings van die Chimeras in Griekeland tot die Egiptiese alchemiste se eksperimente. Sy briewe het my min vertel van sy alledaagse lewe, wat ek kon raai frustrerend en vervelig vir so 'n briljante towenaar was. Verdiep in my eie ervarings het ek met afgryse teen die einde van my jaar lange reis verneem dat nog 'n tragedie Dumbledore getref het: sy suster, Ariana, is dood.

Hoewel Ariana se gesondheid geruime tyd reeds swak was, het hierdie slag so gou ná die verlies van hulle moeder 'n geweldige uitwerking op albei haar broers gehad. Die mense naaste aan Albus – en ek ag myself een van daardie gelukkiges – stem saam dat Ariana se dood en Albus se gevoelens van persoonlike aanspreeklikheid daarvoor (ofskoon hy natuurlik onskuldig was) tot in lengte van dae 'n letsel op hom gelaat het.

Ek het terug huis toe gekeer en 'n jong man aangetref wat 'n veel ouer

persoon se lyding deurgemaak het. Albus was meer teruggetrokke as voorheen, en ook baie minder lighartig. Om tot sy ellende by te dra, het die verlies van Ariana nie tot 'n hernieude band tussen Albus en Aberforth gelei nie, maar tot 'n vervreemding. (Dit sou mettertyd verbygaan – in later jare het hulle hul verhouding herstel en al was dit nooit heg nie, was dit beslis hartlik.) Hy het egter van toe af selde oor sy ouers of Ariana gepraat en sy vriende het geleer om nie na hulle te verwys nie.

Ander veerpenne sal die daaropvolgende jare se seges beskryf. Dumbledore se ontelbare bydraes tot die skatkamer van kennis van die towerkuns, waaronder sy ontdekking van die twaalf gebruike van draakbloed, sal toekomstige geslagte tot voordeel strek, so ook die wysheid wat hy aan die dag gelê het in die baie uitsprake wat hy gelewer het terwyl hy Hooftowenaar van die Towernaarshoërhof was. Daar word steeds gesê geen towertweegeveg kon nog ooit die een tussen Dumbledore en Grindelwald in 1945 ewenaar nie. Die mense wat dit aanskou het, het geskryf oor die ontsetting en ontsag wat hulle ervaar het ten aanskoue van hierdie twee buitengewone towenaars wat mekaar die stryd aansê. Dumbledore se oorwinning, en die gevolge daarvan vir die towerwêreld, word beskou as 'n keerpunt in die geskiedenis van die towerkuns wat gelykstaan aan die inwerkingstelling van die Internasionale Statuut van Stilswye of die val van Hy Wat Nie Genoem Moet Word Nie.

Albus Dumbledore was nooit trots of ydel nie; hy kon iets van waarde in enigiemand vind, al was die persoon oënskynlik ook hoe onbelangrik of armsalig, en ek glo sy vroeë verliese het hom met groot menslikheid en simpatie toegerus. Ek sal sy vriendskap meer mis as wat ek kan sê, maar my verlies is niks in vergelyking met die towerwêreld s'n nie. Hy was ongetwyfeld die mees inspirerende en geliefde van al Hogwarts se skoolhoofde. Hy het gesterf soos hy gelewe het: aan die werk vir ons almal se beswil en, tot sy laaste uur, so gewillig om sy hand uit te strek na 'n seuntjie met draakpokkies as wat hy was die dag toe ek hom ontmoet het.

Harry het klaar gelees, maar staar nog steeds na die foto by die huldeblyk. Dumbledore glimlag sy bekende, goedige glimlag, maar soos hy oor sy halfmaanbril loer, skep hy die indruk, selfs in die koerant, dat hy X-strale neem van Harry wie se hartseer vermeng is met 'n gevoel van ootmoed.

Hy het gedink hy ken Dumbledore taamlik goed, maar vandat hy hierdie huldeblyk gelees het, is hy gedwing om te erken dat hy hom beswaarlik geken het. Hy het hom nooit kon voorstel dat Dumbledore ook kinderdae en 'n jeug gehad het nie; dit was asof hy net tot stand gekom het soos Harry hom geken het: eerbiedwaardig met silwer hare en oud. Die idee van 'n tienderjarige Dumbledore is

eenvoudig vreemd, soos om jou 'n onnosel Hermione voor te stel, of 'n vriendelike Spuitstertkrewel.

Hy het nooit daaraan gedink om Dumbledore oor sy verlede uit te vra nie. Dit sou ongetwyfeld vreemd, selfs voorbarig gevoel het, maar per slot van rekening was Dumbledore se legendariese tweegeveg teen Grindelwald algemene kennis en Harry het nooit daaraan gedink om vir Dumbledore te vra hoe dit was nie, of om hom oor enige van sy ander beroemde prestasies uit te vra nie. Nee, hulle het altyd net gesels oor Harry, Harry se verlede, Harry se toekoms, Harry se planne . . . en dit voel nou vir Harry, afgesien van die feit dat sy toekoms so gevaarlik en onseker is, dat hy onvervangbare geleenthede deur sy vingers laat glip het toe hy versuim het om Dumbledore meer oor homself uit te vra, selfs al was die enigste persoonlike vraag wat hy sy skoolhoof ooit gevra het ook die enigste een wat hy vermoed Dumbledore nie eerlik beantwoord het nie:

"Wat sien u as u in die Spieël kyk?"

"Ek? Ek sien myself wat 'n paar dik wolsokkies vashou."

Nadat hy 'n hele paar minute sit en nadink het, skeur Harry die huldeblyk uit die *Profeet*, vou dit versigtig op en sit dit binne-in die eerste volume van *Praktiese Verdedigende Towerkuns en die Gebruik Daarvan Teen die Donker Kunste*. Dan gooi hy die res van die koerant op die rommelhoop en draai om om na die kamer te kyk. Dit lyk baie netjieser. Al wat nou nog nie 'n plek het nie, is vandag se *Daaglikse Profeet* wat nog steeds op die bed lê en bo-op dit, die stukkie gebreekte spieël.

Harry loop deur die vertrek, haal die spieëlskerf van vandag se *Profeet* af en vou die koerant oop. Hy het vinnig na die hoofopskrif gekyk toe hy die opgerolde koerant vroeg die oggend by die afleweringsuil gevat en dit eenkant gegooi het toe hy sien dit sê niks van Voldemort nie. Harry is seker die Ministerie oefen druk op die *Profeet* uit om nuus oor Voldemort te verswyg. Daarom sien hy nou eers wat hy misgekyk het.

Op die onderste helfte van die voorblad is daar 'n kleiner opskrif geset oor 'n foto van 'n omgekrapte Dumbledore wat vinnig wegstap: *DUMBLEDORE – UITEINDELIK DIE WAARHEID?*

Lees volgende week die skokkende verhaal van die genie met swakhede wat deur so baie as die grootste towenaar van sy generasie beskou word. Rita Skeeter stroop hom van die populêre beeld van 'n bedaarde silwerbaard-wysgeer en onthul die versteurde kinderdae, die wettelose jeug, die lewenslange vetes en die skuldige geheime wat Dumbledore na sy graf toe geneem het. HOEKOM was die man wat almal voorspel het die volgende

Minister van Towerkuns gaan wees, tevrede om maar net 'n skoolhoof te bly? WAT was die geheime organisasie bekend as die Orde van die Feniks se werklike doelstelling? HOE het Dumbledore regtig aan sy einde gekom?

Die antwoorde op hierdie en baie ander vrae word nagevors in die opspraakwekkende nuwe biografie Die Lewe en Leuens van Albus Dumbledore *deur Rita Skeeter. Lees Betty Braithwaite se eksklusiewe onderhoud met haar op bladsy 13 hierbinne.*

Harry pluk die koerant oop en kry bladsy dertien. Boaan die artikel is daar 'n foto van nóg 'n bekende gesig: 'n vrou wat 'n juweelversierde bril dra, oordadig gekrulde blonde hare het, haar tande ontbloot in wat duidelik veronderstel is om 'n innemende glimlag te wees en wat haar vingers vir hom wikkel. Harry doen sy bes om hierdie weersinwekkende beeld te ignoreer en begin lees.

As persoon is Rita Skeeter baie warmer en sagter as wat haar beroemde vurige veerpenportrette 'n mens kan laat dink. Sy groet my in haar knus huis se voorportaal en lei my reguit kombuis toe vir 'n koppie tee, 'n sny pondkoek en vanselfsprekend 'n stomende vat van die varsste skindernuus.

"Wel, Dumbledore is natuurlik 'n biograaf se droom," sê Skeeter. "So 'n lang, vol lewe. Ek is seker my boek gaan die eerste van vele ander wees."

Skeeter het beslis nie gras onder haar voete laat groei nie. Haar boek van negehonderd bladsye is binne slegs vier weke ná Dumbledore se geheimsinnige dood in Junie voltooi. Ek het haar gevra hoe sy dit reggekry het om hierdie supervinnige prestasie te behaal.

"O, as jy al so lank soos ek 'n joernalis is, is dit tweede natuur om volgens 'n keerdatum te werk. Ek het geweet hoe smag die towerwêreld na die volle verhaal en ek wou eerste aan daardie behoefte voldoen."

Ek noem die onlangse, wyd gepubliseerde opmerkings van Elphias Doge, Spesiale Raadgewer van die Towenaarshoërhof en jare lange vriend van Albus Dumbledore, dat "Skeeter se boek minder feite as 'n Sjokoladepaddakaart bevat".

Skeeter gooi haar kop agteroor en lag.

"Dierbare Dodgie! Ek onthou my onderhoud met hom 'n paar jaar gelede oor meermense se regte, foeitog. Hy was totaal en al kêns, vas oortuig ons sit op die bodem van Windermere-meer en het aanhoudend vir my gesê ek moet my oë oophou vir forelle."

Nogtans, Elphias Doge se aantygings van onakkuraatheid word in baie geledere onderskryf. Dink Skeeter werklik vier kort weke was genoeg

om die volle prentjie van Dumbledore se lang en buitengewone lewe te verkry?

"O, my hartjie," sê Skeeter glimlaggend en raps my liefderik oor die vinger, "jy weet so goed soos ek hoeveel inligting genereer 'n vet sak Galjoene, 'n weiering om die woord 'nee' te hoor en 'n lekker skerp Kitskrabbelveerpen! Mense het in elk geval tougestaan om smeerstories oor Dumbledore te vertel. Weet jy, nie almal het gedink hy was so wonderlik nie – hy het op heelwat belangrike tone getrap. Maar ou Dodgie Dommerik kan maar van sy Hippogrief afspring, want ek het toegang tot 'n bron waarvoor die meeste joernaliste hulle towerstawwe sal verruil, iemand wat nog nooit voorheen in die openbaar gepraat het nie en wat na aan Dumbledore was gedurende sy onstuimigste en onrusbarendste jeugjare."

Die vooraf publisiteit vir Skeeter se biografie suggereer dat diegene wat glo Dumbledore het 'n onberispelike lewe gelei beslis 'n paar skokke te wagte kan wees. Ek het haar gevra wat die grootste verrassings was wat sy opgediep het.

"Komaan, Betty! Ek gaan nie al die hoogtepunte verklap voor mense die boek gekoop het nie!" lag Skeeter. "Maar ek kan wel belowe daar wag 'n wrede ontnugtering op enigiemand wat nog dink Dumbledore was so wit soos sy baard! Kom ons volstaan net deur te sê niemand wat hom teen Jy-Weet-Wie hoor uitvaar het, sou ooit kon droom dat hy in sy jeug self ook met die Donker Kunste geheul het nie! En vir 'n towenaar wat hom in sy later jare so vir verdraagsaamheid beywer het, was hy in sy jong dae allesbehalwe ruimhartig! Ja, Albus Dumbledore het 'n uiters duister verlede gehad, om nie te praat van daardie vreeslik verdagte familie wat hy so hard probeer geheim hou het nie."

Ek vra of Skeeter verwys na Dumbledore se broer, Aberforth, wie se skuldigbevinding deur die Towenaarshoërhof vir die misbruik van towerkrag vyftien jaar gelede 'n effense skandaal veroorsaak het.

"O, Aberforth is net die puntjie van die mishoop," lag Skeeter. "Nee, nee, ek praat oor baie erger dinge as 'n broer met 'n voorliefde om met bokke te lol, erger selfs as 'n pa wat Moggels vermink – Dumbledore kon in elk geval nie een van die twee se vergrype stilhou nie; hulle is albei deur die Towenaarshoërhof gevonnis. Nee, dit is die ma en suster wat my nuuskierigheid geprikkel het, en 'n bietjie snuffel het 'n liederlike addernes ontbloot – maar, soos ek sê, julle sal vir hoofstukke nege tot twaalf moet wag om die volle verhaal te hoor. Al wat ek nou kan sê, is dis g'n wonder Dumbledore het nooit gepraat oor hoe sy neus gebreek is nie."

Ondanks familiegeraamtes, ontken Skeeter die genialiteit wat tot Dumbledore se menige towerontdekkings gelei het?

"Hy was intelligent," gee sy toe, "hoewel baie mense dit nou be-

vraagteken of hy werklik volle krediet behoort te kry vir al sy sogenaamde prestasies. Soos wat ek in hoofstuk sestien onthul, beweer Ivor Dillonsby hy het alreeds agt gebruike vir draakbloed ontdek toe Dumbledore sy verhandelinge 'geleen' het."

Maar, waag ek dit, die belangrikheid van party van Dumbledore se suksesse kan nie ontken word nie. Wat van sy beroemde oorwinning oor Grindelwald?

"O, ek is bly jy noem Grindelwald," sê Skeeter met 'n verleidelike glimlag. "Ek's bevrees mense wat in vervoering raak oor Dumbledore se skouspelagtige oorwinning moet hulle staal vir 'n bom – of miskien 'n Misbom. Dit was jou waarlik 'n vuil spulletjie daardie. Al wat ek gaan sê, is – moenie so seker wees daar was regtig 'n skouspelagtige en legendariese tweegeveg nie. Nadat hulle my boek gelees het, sal mense dalk gedwing word om tot die slotsom te kom dat Grindelwald eenvoudig 'n wit sakdoek aan die voorpunt van sy towerstaf opgetower het en hom toe stilweg oorgegee het!"

Skeeter weier om meer oor hierdie boeiende onderwerp te verklap, dus ons beweeg aan na die verhouding wat haar lesers ongetwyfeld meer as enige van die ander sal fassineer.

"O ja," sê Skeeter en knik flink, "ek wy een hele hoofstuk aan die Potter-Dumbledore-verhouding. Dit is reeds as ongesond, selfs sinister bestempel. Jou lesers sal weer eens my boek moet koop vir die volle verhaal, maar daar bestaan geen twyfel dat Dumbledore van die staanspoor af 'n onnatuurlike belangstelling in Potter getoon het nie. Of dit altyd in die seun se beswil was – wel, ons sal sien. Dit is beslis 'n ope geheim dat Potter 'n uiters bewoë adolessensie gehad het."

Ek vra of Skeeter nog in kontak is met Harry Potter met wie sy verlede jaar so 'n opspraakwekkende onderhoud gevoer het: 'n joernalistieke deurbraak waartydens Potter eksklusief gepraat het oor sy oortuiging dat Jy-Weet-Wie teruggekeer het.

"O ja, daar het 'n hegte band tussen ons ontwikkel," sê Skeeter. "Arme Potter het min werklike vriende en ons het mekaar ontmoet tydens een van die mees beproewende oomblikke van sy lewe – die Drietowenaarstoernooi. Ek is moontlik een van die enigste mense lewend wat kan sê hulle ken die regte Harry Potter."

Wat ons netjies uitbring by die talle gerugte wat steeds in omloop is oor Dumbledore se laaste ure. Dink Skeeter Potter was daar toe Dumbledore dood is?

"Wel, ek wil nie te veel sê nie – dis alles in die boek – maar ooggetuies binne Hogwarts-kasteel het Potter van die toneel af sien weghardloop oomblikke nadat Dumbledore geval het, gespring het of afgestamp is. Potter het later teen Severus Snape getuig, 'n man teen wie hy 'n berugte

werk het. Is alles soos wat dit lyk? Die towergemeenskap moet daaroor besluit – sodra hulle my boek gelees het."

Op daardie boeiende noot neem ek afskeid. Skeeter se veerpennevrug gaan ongetwyfeld 'n kitsblitsverkoper wees. Dumbledore se legioene bewonderaars moet intussen solank sidder oor wat eersdaags oor hulle held bekend gemaak gaan word.

Harry kom aan die einde van die artikel, maar staar nog steeds wesenloos na die bladsy. Walging en woede styg soos braaksel in hom op; hy frommel die koerant in 'n bal op en gooi dit met alle mag na die muur waar dit saam met die res van die gemors ophoop om die vullisblik wat nou al oorloop.

Hy begin blindelings in die kamer rondbeweeg, maak leë laaie oop en tel boeke op, net om dit weer op dieselfde stapels neer te sit, skaars bewus van wat hy doen soos frases rond en bontuit die onderhoud met Rita deur sy kop eggo: *een hele hoofstuk aan die Potter-Dumbledore-verhouding . . . Dit is reeds as ongesond, selfs sinister bestempel . . . dat hy in sy jeug self ook met die Donker Kunste geheul het . . . ek het toegang tot 'n bron waarvoor die meeste joernaliste hulle towerstawwe sal verruil . . .*

"Leuens!" brul Harry en sien deur die venster hoe die buurman wat gaan staan het om sy grassnyer weer aan te skakel, senuweeagtig opkyk.

Harry gaan sit hard op die bed. Die gebreekte stukkie spieël dans weg van hom af; hy tel dit op en draai dit in sy vingers om soos hy dink en dink aan Dumbledore en die leuens waarmee Rita Skeeter hom belaster . . .

'n Flits van die helderste blou. Harry vries. Sy gesnyde vinger glip weer op die spieël se ongelyke rand. Hy het hom dit verbeel, hy moes. Hy loer oor sy skouer, maar die muur is die siek perskekleur wat tant Petunia gekies het; daar is niks blou wat die spieël kan weerkaats nie. Hy tuur weer na die spieëlskerf en sien niks behalwe sy eie heldergroen oog na hom terugkyk nie.

Hy het hom dit verbeel, dit is die enigste verklaring; hy het hom dit verbeel omdat hy aan sy oorlede skoolhoof gedink het. As enigiets seker is, dan is dit dat Albus Dumbledore se helderblou oë hom nooit weer sal deurpriem nie.

CHAPTER THREE



THE DURSLEYS DEPARTING

The sound of the front door slamming echoed up the stairs and a voice yelled, "Oi! You!"

Sixteen years of being addressed thus left Harry in no doubt whom his uncle was calling; nevertheless, he did not immediately respond. He was still gazing at the mirror fragment in which, for a split second, he had thought he saw Dumbledore's eye. It was not until his uncle bellowed, "BOY!" that Harry got slowly to his feet and headed for the bedroom door, pausing to add the piece of broken mirror to the rucksack filled with things he would be taking with him.

"You took your time!" roared Vernon Dursley when Harry appeared at the top of the stairs. "Get down here, I want a word!"

Harry strolled downstairs, his hands deep in his jeans pockets.

When he reached the living room he found all three Dursleys. They were dressed for traveling: Uncle Vernon in a fawn zip-up jacket, Aunt Petunia in a neat salmon-colored coat, and Dudley, Harry's large, blond, muscular cousin, in his leather jacket.

"Yes?" asked Harry.

"Sit down!" said Uncle Vernon. Harry raised his eyebrows. "Please!" added Uncle Vernon, wincing slightly as though the word was sharp in his throat.

Harry sat. He thought he knew what was coming. His uncle began to pace up and down, Aunt Petunia and Dudley following his movements with anxious expressions. Finally, his large purple face crumpled with concentration, Uncle Vernon stopped in front of Harry and spoke.

"I've changed my mind," he said.

"What a surprise," said Harry.

"Don't you take that tone —" began Aunt Petunia in a shrill voice, but Vernon Dursley waved her down.

"It's all a lot of claptrap," said Uncle Vernon, glaring at Harry with piggy little eyes. "I've decided I don't believe a word of it. We're staying put, we're not going anywhere."

Harry looked up at his uncle and felt a mixture of exasperation and amusement. Vernon Dursley had been changing his mind every twenty-four hours for the past four weeks, packing and unpacking and repacking the car with every change of heart. Harry's favorite moment had been the one when Uncle Vernon, unaware that Dudley had added his dumbbells to his case since the last time it had been unpacked, had attempted to hoist it back into the boot and collapsed

with roars of pain and much swearing.

"According to you," Vernon Dursley said now, resuming his pacing up and down the living room, "we — Petunia, Dudley, and I — are in danger. From — from —"

"Some of 'my lot,' right," said Harry.

"Well, I don't believe it," repeated Uncle Vernon, coming to a halt in front of Harry again. "I was awake half the night thinking it all over, and I believe it's a plot to get the house."

"The house?" repeated Harry. "What house?"

"*This* house!" shrieked Uncle Vernon, the vein in his forehead starting to pulse. "*Our* house! House prices are skyrocketing around here! You want us out of the way and then you're going to do a bit of hocus-pocus and before we know it the deeds will be in your name and —"

"Are you out of your mind?" demanded Harry. "A plot to get this house? Are you actually as stupid as you look?"

"Don't you dare — !" squealed Aunt Petunia, but again, Vernon waved her down: Slights on his personal appearance were, it seemed, as nothing to the danger he had spotted.

"Just in case you've forgotten," said Harry, "I've already got a house, my godfather left me one. So why would I want this one? All the happy memories?"

There was silence. Harry thought he had rather impressed his uncle with this argument.

"You claim," said Uncle Vernon, starting to pace yet again, "that this Lord Thing —"

"— Voldemort," said Harry impatiently, "and we've been through

this about a hundred times already. This isn't a claim, it's fact, Dumbledore told you last year, and Kingsley and Mr. Weasley —"

Vernon Dursley hunched his shoulders angrily, and Harry guessed that his uncle was attempting to ward off recollections of the unannounced visit, a few days into Harry's summer holidays, of two fully grown wizards. The arrival on the doorstep of Kingsley Shacklebolt and Arthur Weasley had come as a most unpleasant shock to the Dursleys. Harry had to admit, however, that as Mr. Weasley had once demolished half of the living room, his reappearance could not have been expected to delight Uncle Vernon.

"— Kingsley and Mr. Weasley explained it all as well," Harry pressed on remorselessly. "Once I'm seventeen, the protective charm that keeps me safe will break, and that exposes you as well as me. The Order is sure Voldemort will target you, whether to torture you to try and find out where I am, or because he thinks by holding you hostage I'd come and try to rescue you."

Uncle Vernon's and Harry's eyes met. Harry was sure that in that instant they were both wondering the same thing. Then Uncle Vernon walked on and Harry resumed, "You've got to go into hiding and the Order wants to help. You're being offered serious protection, the best there is."

Uncle Vernon said nothing, but continued to pace up and down. Outside the sun hung low over the privet hedges. The next-door neighbor's lawn mower stalled again.

"I thought there was a Ministry of Magic?" asked Vernon Dursley abruptly.

"There is," said Harry, surprised.

"Well, then, why can't they protect us? It seems to me that, as innocent victims, guilty of nothing more than harboring a marked man, we ought to qualify for government protection!"

Harry laughed; he could not help himself. It was so very typical of his uncle to put his hopes in the establishment, even within this world that he despised and mistrusted.

"You heard what Mr. Weasley and Kingsley said," Harry replied. "We think the Ministry has been infiltrated."

Uncle Vernon strode to the fireplace and back, breathing so heavily that his great black mustache rippled, his face still purple with concentration.

"All right," he said, stopping in front of Harry yet again. "All right, let's say, for the sake of argument, we accept this protection. I still don't see why we can't have that Kingsley bloke."

Harry managed not to roll his eyes, but with difficulty. This question had also been addressed half a dozen times.

"As I've told you," he said through gritted teeth, "Kingsley is protecting the Mug — I mean, your Prime Minister."

"Exactly — he's the best!" said Uncle Vernon, pointing at the blank television screen. The Dursleys had spotted Kingsley on the news, walking along discreetly behind the Muggle Prime Minister as he visited a hospital. This, and the fact that Kingsley had mastered the knack of dressing like a Muggle, not to mention a certain reassuring something in his slow, deep voice, had caused the Dursleys to take to Kingsley in a way that they had certainly not done with any other wizard, although it was true that they had never seen him with his earring in.

"Well, he's taken," said Harry. "But Hestia Jones and Dedalus Diggle are more than up to the job —"

"If we'd even seen CVs . . ." began Uncle Vernon, but Harry lost patience. Getting to his feet, he advanced on his uncle, now pointing at the TV set himself.

"These accidents aren't accidents — the crashes and explosions and derailments and whatever else has happened since we last watched the news. People are disappearing and dying and he's behind it — Voldemort. I've told you this over and over again, he kills Muggles for fun. Even the fogs — they're caused by dementors, and if you can't remember what they are, ask your son!"

Dudley's hands jerked upward to cover his mouth. With his parents' and Harry's eyes upon him, he slowly lowered them again and asked, "There are . . . more of them?"

"More?" laughed Harry. "More than the two that attacked us, you mean? Of course there are, there are hundreds, maybe thousands by this time, seeing as they feed off fear and despair —"

"All right, all right," blustered Vernon Dursley. "You've made your point —"

"I hope so," said Harry, "because once I'm seventeen, all of them — Death Eaters, dementors, maybe even Inferi — which means dead bodies enchanted by a Dark wizard — will be able to find you and will certainly attack you. And if you remember the last time you tried to outrun wizards, I think you'll agree you need help."

There was a brief silence in which the distant echo of Hagrid smashing down a wooden front door seemed to reverberate through the intervening years. Aunt Petunia was looking at Uncle Vernon;

Dudley was staring at Harry. Finally Uncle Vernon blurted out, "But what about my work? What about Dudley's school? I don't suppose those things matter to a bunch of layabout wizards —"

"Don't you understand?" shouted Harry. *"They will torture and kill you like they did my parents!"*

"Dad," said Dudley in a loud voice, "Dad — I'm going with these Order people."

"Dudley," said Harry, "for the first time in your life, you're talking sense."

He knew that the battle was won. If Dudley was frightened enough to accept the Order's help, his parents would accompany him: There could be no question of being separated from their Diddykins. Harry glanced at the carriage clock on the mantelpiece.

"They'll be here in about five minutes," he said, and when none of the Dursleys replied, he left the room. The prospect of parting — probably forever — from his aunt, uncle, and cousin was one that he was able to contemplate quite cheerfully, but there was nevertheless a certain awkwardness in the air. What did you say to one another at the end of sixteen years' solid dislike?

Back in his bedroom, Harry fiddled aimlessly with his rucksack, then poked a couple of owl nuts through the bars of Hedwig's cage. They fell with dull thuds to the bottom, where she ignored them.

"We're leaving soon, really soon," Harry told her. "And then you'll be able to fly again."

The doorbell rang. Harry hesitated, then headed back out of his room and downstairs. It was too much to expect Hestia and Dedalus to cope with the Dursleys on their own.

"Harry Potter!" squeaked an excited voice, the moment Harry had opened the door; a small man in a mauve top hat was sweeping him a deep bow. "An honor, as ever!"

"Thanks, Dedalus," said Harry, bestowing a small and embarrassed smile upon the dark-haired Hestia. "It's really good of you to do this . . . They're through here, my aunt and uncle and cousin. . . ."

"Good day to you, Harry Potter's relatives!" said Dedalus happily, striding into the living room. The Dursleys did not look at all happy to be addressed thus; Harry half expected another change of mind. Dudley shrank nearer to his mother at the sight of the witch and wizard.

"I see you are packed and ready. Excellent! The plan, as Harry has told you, is a simple one," said Dedalus, pulling an immense pocket watch out of his waistcoat and examining it. "We shall be leaving before Harry does. Due to the danger of using magic in your house — Harry being still underage, it could provide the Ministry with an excuse to arrest him — we shall be driving, say, ten miles or so, before Disapparating to the safe location we have picked out for you. You know how to drive, I take it?" he asked Uncle Vernon politely.

"Know how to — ? Of course I ruddy well know how to drive!" spluttered Uncle Vernon.

"Very clever of you, sir, very clever, I personally would be utterly bamboozled by all those buttons and knobs," said Dedalus. He was clearly under the impression that he was flattering Vernon Dursley, who was visibly losing confidence in the plan with every word Dedalus spoke.

"Can't even drive," he muttered under his breath, his mustache rippling indignantly, but fortunately neither Dedalus nor Hestia seemed to hear him.

"You, Harry," Dedalus continued, "will wait here for your guard. There has been a little change in the arrangements —"

"What d'you mean?" said Harry at once. "I thought Mad-Eye was going to come and take me by Side-Along-Apparition?"

"Can't do it," said Hestia tersely. "Mad-Eye will explain."

The Dursleys, who had listened to all of this with looks of utter incomprehension on their faces, jumped as a loud voice screeched, *"Hurry up!"* Harry looked all around the room before realizing that the voice had issued from Dedalus's pocket watch.

"Quite right, we're operating to a very tight schedule," said Dedalus, nodding at his watch and tucking it back into his waistcoat. "We are attempting to time your departure from the house with your family's Disapparition, Harry; thus, the charm breaks at the moment you all head for safety." He turned to the Dursleys. "Well, are we all packed and ready to go?"

None of them answered him. Uncle Vernon was still staring, appalled, at the bulge in Dedalus's waistcoat pocket.

"Perhaps we should wait outside in the hall, Dedalus," murmured Hestia. She clearly felt that it would be tactless for them to remain in the room while Harry and the Dursleys exchanged loving, possibly tearful farewells.

"There's no need," Harry muttered, but Uncle Vernon made any further explanation unnecessary by saying loudly,

"Well, this is good-bye, then, boy."

He swung his right arm upward to shake Harry's hand, but at the last moment seemed unable to face it, and merely closed his fist and began swinging it backward and forward like a metronome.

"Ready, Diddy?" asked Aunt Petunia, fussily checking the clasp of her handbag so as to avoid looking at Harry altogether.

Dudley did not answer, but stood there with his mouth slightly ajar, reminding Harry a little of the giant, Grawp.

"Come along, then," said Uncle Vernon.

He had already reached the living room door when Dudley mumbled, "I don't understand."

"What don't you understand, popkin?" asked Aunt Petunia, looking up at her son.

Dudley raised a large, hamlike hand to point at Harry.

"Why isn't he coming with us?"

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia froze where they stood, staring at Dudley as though he had just expressed a desire to become a ballerina.

"What?" said Uncle Vernon loudly.

"Why isn't he coming too?" asked Dudley.

"Well, he — he doesn't want to," said Uncle Vernon, turning to glare at Harry and adding, "You don't want to, do you?"

"Not in the slightest," said Harry.

"There you are," Uncle Vernon told Dudley. "Now come on, we're off."

He marched out of the room. They heard the front door open, but Dudley did not move and after a few faltering steps Aunt Petunia

stopped too.

"What now?" barked Uncle Vernon, reappearing in the doorway.

It seemed that Dudley was struggling with concepts too difficult to put into words. After several moments of apparently painful internal struggle he said, "But where's he going to go?"

Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon looked at each other. It was clear that Dudley was frightening them. Hestia Jones broke the silence.

"But . . . surely you know where your nephew is going?" she asked, looking bewildered.

"Certainly we know," said Vernon Dursley. "He's off with some of your lot, isn't he? Right, Dudley, let's get in the car, you heard the man, we're in a hurry."

Again, Vernon Dursley marched as far as the front door, but Dudley did not follow.

"Off with some of *our* lot?"

Hestia looked outraged. Harry had met this attitude before: Witches and wizards seemed stunned that his closest living relatives took so little interest in the famous Harry Potter.

"It's fine," Harry assured her. "It doesn't matter, honestly."

"Doesn't matter?" repeated Hestia, her voice rising ominously. "Don't these people realize what you've been through? What danger you are in? The unique position you hold in the hearts of the anti-Voldemort movement?"

"Er — no, they don't," said Harry. "They think I'm a waste of space, actually, but I'm used to —"

"I don't think you're a waste of space."

If Harry had not seen Dudley's lips move, he might not have

believed it. As it was, he stared at Dudley for several seconds before accepting that it must have been his cousin who had spoken; for one thing, Dudley had turned red. Harry was embarrassed and astonished himself.

"Well . . . er . . . thanks, Dudley."

Again, Dudley appeared to grapple with thoughts too unwieldy for expression before mumbling, "You saved my life."

"Not really," said Harry. "It was your soul the dementor would have taken. . . ."

He looked curiously at his cousin. They had had virtually no contact during this summer or last, as Harry had come back to Privet Drive so briefly and kept to his room so much. It now dawned on Harry, however, that the cup of cold tea on which he had trodden that morning might not have been a booby trap at all. Although rather touched, he was nevertheless quite relieved that Dudley appeared to have exhausted his ability to express his feelings. After opening his mouth once or twice more, Dudley subsided into scarlet-faced silence.

Aunt Petunia burst into tears. Hestia Jones gave her an approving look that changed to outrage as Aunt Petunia ran forward and embraced Dudley rather than Harry.

"S-so sweet, Dudders . . ." she sobbed into his massive chest. "S-such a lovely b-boy . . . s-saying thank you . . ."

"But he hasn't said thank you at all!" said Hestia indignantly. "He only said he didn't think Harry was a waste of space!"

"Yeah, but coming from Dudley that's like 'I love you,'" said Harry, torn between annoyance and a desire to laugh as Aunt Petunia

continued to clutch at Dudley as if he had just saved Harry from a burning building.

"Are we going or not?" roared Uncle Vernon, reappearing yet again at the living room door. "I thought we were on a tight schedule!"

"Yes — yes, we are," said Dedalus Diggle, who had been watching these exchanges with an air of bemusement and now seemed to pull himself together. "We really must be off. Harry —"

He tripped forward and wrung Harry's hand with both of his own.

"— good luck. I hope we meet again. The hopes of the Wizarding world rest upon your shoulders."

"Oh," said Harry, "right. Thanks."

"Farewell, Harry," said Hestia, also clasping his hand. "Our thoughts go with you."

"I hope everything's okay," said Harry with a glance toward Aunt Petunia and Dudley.

"Oh, I'm sure we shall end up the best of chums," said Diggle brightly, waving his hat as he left the room. Hestia followed him.

Dudley gently released himself from his mother's clutches and walked toward Harry, who had to repress an urge to threaten him with magic. Then Dudley held out his large, pink hand.

"Blimey, Dudley," said Harry over Aunt Petunia's renewed sobs, "did the dementors blow a different personality into you?"

"Dunno," muttered Dudley. "See you, Harry."

"Yeah . . ." said Harry, taking Dudley's hand and shaking it. "Maybe. Take care, Big D."

Dudley nearly smiled, then lumbered from the room. Harry heard

his heavy footfalls on the graveled drive, and then a car door slammed.

Aunt Petunia, whose face had been buried in her handkerchief, looked around at the sound. She did not seem to have expected to find herself alone with Harry. Hastily stowing her wet handkerchief into her pocket, she said, “Well — good-bye,” and marched toward the door without looking at him.

“Good-bye,” said Harry.

She stopped and looked back. For a moment Harry had the strangest feeling that she wanted to say something to him: She gave him an odd, tremulous look and seemed to teeter on the edge of speech, but then, with a little jerk of her head, she bustled out of the room after her husband and son.

Die Dursleys Vertrek

Die geluid van die voordeur wat toeklap, eggo by die trap op en 'n stem gil: "Haai! Jy!"

Hy word al sestien jaar lank so aangespreek en daar bestaan geen twyfel by Harry dat sy oom hom roep nie; nogtans antwoord hy nie dadelik nie. Hy staar nog steeds na die spieëlskerf waarin hy vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde gedink het hy sien Dumbledore se oog. Eers toe sy oom "SEUN!" bulder, kom Harry stadig op die been en mik kamerdeur toe, maar dan gaan staan hy eers om die stukkie gebreekte spieël by die ander goed wat hy saam met hom gaan vat in die rugsak te sit.

"Jy vat jou tyd!" brul Vernon Dursley toe Harry aan die bopunt van die trap verskyn. "Maak dat jy onder kom. Ek wil met jou praat!"

Harry slenter ondertoe, sy hande diep in sy jeans se sakke. Toe hy in die woonkamer kom, tref hy al drie Dursleys daar aan. Hulle is aangetrek om op reis te gaan: oom Vernon dra 'n vaalbruin opritsbaadjie, tant Petunia 'n netjiese, salmkleurige jas en Dudley, Harry se groot blonde, gespierde neef, is in sy leerbaadjie.

"Ja?" vra Harry.

"Sit!" sê oom Vernon. Harry lig sy wenkbroue. "Asseblief!" voeg oom Vernon by en sy gesig vertrek effens asof die woord sy keel brand.

Harry sit. Hy dink hy weet wat kom. Sy oom begin op en af loop; tant Petunia en Dudley volg sy bewegings met angstige uitdrukkings. Uiteindelik, met sy groot pers gesig inmekaar getrek van konsentrasie, stop oom Vernon voor Harry en praat.

"Ek het van plan verander," sê hy.

"Dis 'n verrassing," sê Harry.

"Moenie daardie stemtoon aanslaan nie –" begin tant Petunia met 'n skril stem, maar Vernon Dursley beduie sy moet stilbly.

"Dis alles 'n spul nonsens," sê oom Vernon en gluur met klein varkogies na Harry. "Ek het besluit ek glo nie 'n woord daarvan nie. Ons bly net hier; ons gaan nêrens heen nie."

Harry kyk op na sy oom met 'n mengsel van wanhoop en genot. Vernon Dursley het die afgelope vier weke elke vier-en-twintig uur van plan verander en met elke gemoedsverandering is die motor gepak, uitgepak en weer gepak. Harry se gunstelingoomblik was die een toe oom Vernon, onbewus van die feit dat Dudley sy handgewigte in sy tas gesit het vandat dit die vorige keer uitgepak is, dit probeer optel het om dit in die kattebak te sit, en toe met pynkrete en baie geswets inmekaar gesak het.

"Volgens jou," sê Vernon Dursley nou en begin weer op en af in die woonkamer loop, "word ons – ek, Petunia en Dudley – in gevaar gestel. Deur – deur –"

"Party van 'my spul', ja," sê Harry.

"Wel, ek glo dit nie," herhaal oom Vernon en kom weer voor Harry tot stilstand. "Ek was die helfte van die nag wakker en het mooi oor alles gedink en ek glo dis 'n komplot om die huis te kry."

"Die huis?" herhaal Harry. "Watter huis?"

"*Hierdie* huis!" gil oom Vernon en die aar in sy voorkop begin klop. "*Ons* huis! Huispryse skiet die hoogte in hier rond! Jy wil ons uit die pad uit hê and dan gaan jy van jou goëlgoed doen en as ons weer sien, is die kaart en transport in jou naam en –"

"Is jy van jou kop af?" vra Harry vererg. "'n Komplot om hierdie huis te kry? Is jy wraggies so simpel as wat jy lyk?"

"Hoe durf jy?!" gil tant Petunia, maar oom Vernon maak haar weer met 'n gebaar stil; beledigings oor hoe hy lyk, is blykbaar niks in vergelyking met die gevaar wat hy bespeur het nie.

"Net ingeval jy vergeet het," sê Harry, "ek het al klaar 'n huis. My peetpa het dit vir my nagelaat. Hoekom sal ek dus dié een wil hê? Oor al die gelukkige herinneringe?"

Daar is stilte. Harry dink hy het sy oom nogal beïndruk met hierdie argument.

"Jy beweer," sê oom Vernon wat weer heen en weer begin loop, "daardie Heer Ding –"

"Voldemort," sê Harry ongeduldig, "en ons is omtrent al 'n honderd keer hierdeur. Dis nie 'n bewering nie; dis 'n feit. Dumbledore het dit laas jaar vir julle gesê, en Kingsley en meneer Weasley –"

Vernon Dursley maak sy skouers krom en Harry raai sy oom probeer vergeet van die onverwagte besoek van twee volwasse towenaars 'n paar dae ná die begin van Harry se somervakansie. Kingsley Schacklebolt en Arthur Weasley se verskyning op die drumpel was 'n geweldig onaangename skok vir die Dursleys. Harry moet egter erken dat aangesien meneer Weasley eenkeer die helfte van die woonkamer vernietig het, 'n mens nie kan ver-

wag dat oom Vernon opgewonde moes wees om hom weer te sien nie.

"– Kingsley en meneer Weasley het dit ook alles verduidelik," gaan Harry meedoënloos voort. "Sodra ek sewentien is, word die beskermende towerspreuk wat my veilig hou, verbreek, en dit sal julle sowel as vir my aan gevaar blootstel. Die Orde is seker Voldemort gaan julle teiken, óf om julle te martel en uit te vind waar ek is óf omdat hy dink as hy julle gyselaar hou, sal ek terugkom om julle te probeer red."

Oom Vernon en Harry se oë ontmoet mekaar. Harry is seker hulle wonder op hierdie oomblik oor dieselfde ding. Dan loop oom Vernon verder en Harry hervat: "Julle moet skuiling vind en die Orde wil julle help. Hulle bied vir julle ordentlike beskerming aan, die beste wat daar is."

Oom Vernon sê niks nie, maar hou aan op en af stap. Buite hang die son laag oor die ligusterheinings. Die buurman se grassnyer vrek weer.

"Ek dog daar is 'n Ministerie van Towerkuns?" vra oom Vernon uit die bloute.

"Daar is," sê Harry verbaas.

"Wel, hoekom kan hulle ons dan nie beskerm nie? Ons is onskuldige slagoffers wat aan niks meer skuldig is as dat ons vir 'n gemerkte man skuiling gegee het nie. Wat my betref, kwalifiseer ons vir staatsbeskerming!"

Harry lag; hy kan homself nie keer nie. Dit is so tipies van sy oom om sy hoop op die heersende bestel te vestig, selfs in hierdie wêreld wat hy verag en wantrou.

"Jy't gehoor wat meneer Weasley en Kingsley sê," antwoord Harry. "Ons dink die Ministerie is geïnfiltreer."

Oom Vernon stap na die kaggel toe en terug en haal so swaar asem dat sy groot swart snor tril. Sy gesig is nog steeds pers van konsentrasie.

"Nou goed," sê hy en stop weer eens voor Harry. "Nou goed, kom ons sê argumentshalwe ons aanvaar hierdie beskerming. Ek sien nog steeds nie hoekom ons nie daardie Kingsley-vent kan kry nie."

Harry kry dit reg om nie sy oë te rol nie, maar met moeite. Hierdie kwessie is ook al 'n halfdosyn keer aangespreek.

"Soos ek vir jou gesê het," sê hy deur knersende tande, "Kingsley beskerm die Mog– ek bedoel, julle Eerste Minister."

"Presies – hy's die beste!" sê oom Vernon en wys na die leë televisieskerm. Die Dursleys het op die nuus gesien hoe Kingsley dis-

kreet agter die Moggel Eerste Minister aanloop tydens 'n besoek aan 'n hospitaal. Dit, en die feit dat Kingsley die kuns bemeester het om soos 'n Moggel aan te trek, om nie te praat van 'n sekere gerusstellende iets in sy stadige, diep stem nie, het veroorsaak dat die Dursleys van Kingsley begin hou het soos beslis nog nooit voorheen van enige ander towenaar nie, alhoewel hulle hom natuurlik nog nooit met sy oorring aan gesien het nie.

"Wel, hy's bespreek," sê Harry. "Maar Hestia Jones en Dedalus Diggle is meer as goed genoeg –"

"Ons wil ten minste hulle CV's sien . . ." begin oom Vernon, maar Harry verloor geduld. Hy spring op, pyl op sy oom af en wys nou self na die TV-stel.

"Daardie ongelukke is nie ongelukke nie – die botsings en ontploffings en ontsporings en wat ook al gebeur het sedert ons laas nuus gekyk het. Mense verdwyn en gaan dood, en hy sit daaragter – Voldemort. Ek het julle al oor en oor gesê, hy maak Moggels vir die lekker dood. Selfs die mistige weer – dit word veroorsaak deur Dementors, en as jy nie kan onthou wat hulle is nie, vra jou seun!"

Dudley se hande skiet op om sy mond te bedek. Hy gewaar sy ouers en Harry se oë op hom, laat sak sy hande weer stadig en vra: "Is daar . . . nog van hulle?"

"Nog?" lag Harry. "Jy bedoel behalwe die twee wat ons aangeval het? Natuurlik is daar nog. Daar is honderde, teen dié tyd seker duisende, aangesien hulle op vrees en wanhoop teer –"

"Nou goed, nou goed," keer Vernon Dursley. "Jy het jou punt gemaak –"

"Ek hoop so," sê Harry, "want sodra ek sewentien is, sal almal van hulle – Doodseters, Dementors, miskien selfs Inferi, dis dooie liggame wat in 'n Donker towenaar se mag is – julle kan opspoor en julle vir seker aanval. En as julle die laaste keer onthou toe julle van towenaars probeer wegkom het, dink ek julle sal saamstem dat julle hulp nodig het."

Daar is 'n kort stilte waarin die veraf eggo van Hagrid wat 'n houtdeur platloop skynbaar deur die jare tussenin weerklink. Tant Petunia kyk na oom Vernon; Dudley staar na Harry. Uiteindelik bars oom Vernon los: "Maar wat van my werk? Wat van Dudley se skool? Ek veronderstel sulke dinge maak nie vir 'n spul leeglêer-towenaars saak nie –"

"Verstaan jy nie?" skree Harry. *"Hulle sal julle martel en doodmaak soos hulle met my ouers gedoen het!"*

"Pa," sê Dudley in 'n harde stem, "Pa – ek gaan saam met hierdie Orde-ouens."

"Dudley," sê Harry, "jy praat vir die eerste keer in jou lewe soos iemand met verstand."

Hy weet die geveg is gewonne. As Dudley bang genoeg is om die Orde se hulp te aanvaar, sal sy ouers saam met hom gaan: hulle sal onder geen omstandighede van hulle Dudders geskei wil wees nie. Harry kyk na die outydse reiswekker op die kaggelrak.

"Hulle sal oor omtrent vyf minute hier wees," sê hy, en toe nie een van die Dursleys reageer nie, loop hy by die vertrek uit. Die vooruitsig om van sy tante, oom en neef afskeid te neem – moontlik vir goed – is iets waarna hy nogal uitsien, maar daar is nogtans 'n effense ongemaklikheid in die lug. Wat sê jy vir mekaar ná sestien jaar van absolute renons?

Terug in sy kamer vroetel Harry doelloos met sy rugsak en druk dan 'n paar uilneute deur die tralies van Hedwig se hok. Hulle val met dowwe slae op die vloer neer waar sy hulle ignoreer.

"Ons waai nou-nou, sommer gou," sê Harry vir haar. "En dan sal jy weer kan vlieg."

Die deurklokkie lui. Harry huiwer, gaan dan by sy kamer uit en terug ondertoe. Dit is te veel gevra van Hestia en Dedalus om alleen met die Dursleys te moet regkom.

"Harry Potter!" piep 'n opgewonde stem die oomblik toe Harry die deur oopmaak. 'n Klein mannetjie in 'n malvapers bolhoed buig laag voor hom. "'n Eer, soos altyd."

"Dankie, Dedalus," sê Harry en glimlag effens verleë vir die donkerkop Hestia. "Dis regtig gaaf van julle om dit te doen . . . Hulle's in daardie kamer, my oom en tante en neef . . ."

"Dagsê aan julle, Harry Potter se familie!" sê Dedalus vrolik toe hy by die woonvertrek instap. Die Dursleys lyk glad nie gelukkig om so aangespreek te word nie; Harry verwag half dat hulle weer van plan verander het. Dudley skuif nader aan sy ma toe hy die heks en towenaar sien.

"Ek sien julle is gepak en gereed. Uitstekend! Die plan, soos Harry vir julle verduidelik het, is heel eenvoudig," sê Dedalus terwyl hy 'n yslike sakhorlosie uit sy onderbaadjie haal en dit bekyk. "Ons gaan voor Harry vertrek. Vanweë die gevaar om towerkrag in julle huis te gebruik – aangesien Harry tot op sewentien nog minderjarig is, kan die Ministerie dit as verskoning gebruik om hom te arresteer – gaan ons hier wegry, sê tien myl of so, voor ons disappareer na die veilige plek wat ons vir julle uitgekies het. Ek neem aan u weet hoe om te bestuur?" vra hy vriendelik vir oom Vernon.

"Weet hoe om te –? Natuurlik! Ek weet deksels goed hoe om te bestuur!" proes oom Vernon dit uit.

"Baie slim van u, meneer, baie slim. Persoonlik sal ek heeltemal deurmekaar raak met al daardie knoppies en goedjies," sê Dedalus. Hy dink duidelik hy vlei Vernon Dursley, wat sigbaar vertroue in die plan verloor met elke woord wat Dedalus sê.

"Kan nie eens bestuur nie," prewel hy onderlangs terwyl sy snor verontwaardig tril, maar gelukkig lyk dit of nóg Dedalus nóg Hestia hom hoor.

"Jy, Harry," gaan Dedalus verder, "moet hier wag vir jou lyfwag. Daar is 'n effense verandering in die reëlings –"

"Wat bedoel jy?" wil Harry dadelik weet. "Ek dog Maloog gaan kom en my met sy-aan-sy-apparering hier wegvat?"

"Hy kan nie," sê Hestia saaklik. "Maloog sal verduidelik."

Die Dursleys, wat met kyke van volslae ongeloof na dit alles geluister het, wip van die skrik toe 'n harde stem uitbasuin: *"Maak gou!"* Harry kyk oral in die vertrek rond voor hy besef die stem het uit Dedalus se sakhorlosie gekom.

"Heeltemal reg, ons werk volgens 'n baie strng skedule," sê Dedalus terwyl hy vir sy horlosie knik en dit in sy onderbaadjie terugsit. "Ons gaan probeer om jou vertrek hiervandaan met jou familie se Disapparering te laat saamval, Harry. Dus sal die towerspreuk verbreek word die oomblik wat julle almal op pad na veiligheid is." Hy draai na die Dursleys toe. "Wel, is ons gepak en gereed om te gaan?"

Nie een van hulle antwoord hom nie: oom Vernon staar nog steeds ontsteld na die bult in Dedalus se onderbaadjiesak.

"Miskien moet ons buite in die voorportaal gaan wag, Dedalus," prewel Hestia. Sy voel duidelik dit sal taktloos van hulle wees om in die vertrek te bly terwyl Harry en die Dursleys liefdevol en moontlik tranerig van mekaar afskeid neem.

"Dis nie nodig nie," brom Harry, maar oom Vernon maak enige verdere verduideliking onnodig deur hard te sê: "Wel, dit is dan tot siens, seun."

Hy lig sy regterarm om Harry se hand te skud, maar sien op die laaste oomblik blykbaar nie meer daarvoor kans nie, maak sy vuis eenvoudig toe en begin dit soos 'n metronoom heen en weer swaai.

"Reg, Dudders?" vra tant Petunia en gaan vitterig haar handsak se knip na om te verhoed dat sy enigsins na Harry hoef te kyk.

Dudley antwoord nie, maar staan daar met sy mond effens oop. Hy herinner Harry 'n bietjie aan die reus, Ghrop.

"Nou kom dan," sê oom Vernon.

Hy is al by die woonkamer se deur toe Dudley mompel: "Ek verstaan nie."

"Wat verstaan jy nie, skatlam?" vra tant Petunia en kyk op na haar seun.

Dudley lig 'n groot hand wat soos 'n stuk ham lyk en wys na Harry.

"Hoekom kom hy nie saam met ons nie?"

Oom Vernon en tant Petunia vries waar hulle staan en staar na Dudley asof hy so pas gesê het hy wil 'n ballerina word.

"Wat?" vra oom Vernon hard.

"Hoekom kom hy nie ook nie?" vra Dudley.

"Wel, hy – hy wil nie," sê oom Vernon. Hy draai na Harry toe, gluur hom aan en voeg by: "Jy wil mos nie, wil jy?"

"Nie in die minste nie," sê Harry.

"Daar het jy dit," sê oom Vernon vir Dudley. "Kom nou, laat ons weg wees."

Hy marsjeer by die vertrek uit. Hulle hoor die voordeur oopgaan, maar Dudley beweeg nie en ná 'n paar aarselende tree gaan tant Petunia ook staan.

"Wat nou?" blaf oom Vernon en verskyn weer in die deuropening.

Dit lyk of Dudley worstel met konsepte wat te moeilik is om te verwoord. Ná 'n hele paar oomblikke van oënskynlik pynlike innerlike wroeging sê hy: "Maar waarnatoe gaan hy?"

Tant Petunia en oom Vernon kyk na mekaar. Dit is duidelik dat Dudley hulle bang maak. Hestia Jones verbreek die stilte.

"Maar . . . julle weet tog sekerlik waarheen julle neef gaan?" vra sy en lyk verward.

"Natuurlik weet ons," sê Vernon Dursley. "Hy gaan saam met 'n paar van julle spul padgee, nie waar nie? Reg, Dudley, laat ons in die kar kom. Jy't die man gehoor; ons is haastig."

Vernon Dursley marsjeer weer tot by die voordeur, maar Dudley volg hom nie.

"Saam met 'n paar van *ons* spul padgee?"

Hestia lyk hoogs verontwaardig. Harry het al vantevore hiermee doen gekry: hekse en towenaars is telkens verstom dat sy naaste lewende familie so min vir die beroemde Harry Potter omgee.

"Dis oukei," verseker Harry haar. "Dit maak nie saak nie, regtig."

"Maak nie saak nie?" herhaal Hestia en haar stem styg onheilspellend. "Besef hierdie mense nie waardeur jy is nie? Weet hulle nie in watter gevaar jy verkeer nie? Watter unieke posisie jy in die harte van die anti-Voldemort-beweging beklee nie?"

"E – nee, hulle weet nie," sê Harry. "Hulle dink eintlik ek is 'n vermorsing van ruimte, maar ek is daaraan gewoond dat –"

"Ek dink nie jy's 'n vermorsing van ruimte nie."

As Harry Dudley se lippe nie sien beweeg het nie, sou hy dit seker nie geglo het nie. Hy staar nogtans eers 'n paar sekondes lank na Dudley voor hy aanvaar dit moet sy neef gewees het wat gepraat het. Dudley het intussen rooi geword. Harry is self verleë en verstom.

"Wel . . . e . . . dankie, Dudley."

Dit lyk of Dudley weer worstel met gedagtes wat te onhanteerbaar is om aan uitdrukking te gee en dan mompel hy: "Jy't my lewe gered."

"Nie regtig nie," sê Harry. "Die Dementor sou jou siel gevat het . . ."

Hy kyk nuuskierig na sy neef. Hulle het hierdie en verlede somervakansie byna geen kontak met mekaar gehad nie, want Harry was net vir 'n kort tydjie in Ligusterlaan en het byna heeltyd in sy kamer gebly. Harry besef egter nou die koppie koue tee waarop hy die oggend getrap het, was dalk glad nie 'n poets nie. Al is hy nogal ontroer, is hy nogtans taamlik verlig dat Dudley se vermoë om uitdrukking aan sy gevoelens te gee blykbaar nou uitgeput is. Dudley maak sy mond nog een of twee keer oop en verval dan met 'n vuurrooi gesig in stilte.

Tant Petunia bars in trane uit. Hestia Jones kyk haar goedkeurend aan, maar word dadelik weer ontstoke as tant Petunia vorentoe hardloop en Dudley in plaas van Harry omhels.

"S – So lief van jou, Dudders . . ." snik sy op sy massiewe borskas, "s – so 'n lieflike s – seun . . . s – sê so mooi dankie . . ."

"Hy't glad nie dankie gesê nie!" roep Hestia verontwaardig uit. "Hy't net gesê hy dink nie Harry is 'n vermorsing van ruimte nie!"

"Ja, maar komende van Dudley is dit soos 'Ek het jou lief'," sê Harry wat in twee geskeur is tussen irritasie en 'n begeerte om te lag terwyl tant Petunia aanhou om aan Dudley te klou asof hy Harry nou net uit 'n brandende gebou gered het.

"Gaan ons nou, of nie?" brul oom Vernon wat weer eens in die woonkamer se deur verskyn. "Ek dog ons is op 'n streng skedule!"

"Ja – ja, ons is," sê Dedalus Diggle wat hierdie woordewisseling met 'n verbysterde blik dopgehou het en hom blykbaar nou regruk. "Ons moet regtig nou weg wees, Harry –"

Hy trippel vorentoe en druk Harry se hand styf vas met albei syne.

"– sterkte. Ek hoop ons ontmoet mekaar weer. Die towerwêreld se hoop rus op jou skouers."

"O," sê Harry. "Reg. Dankie."

"Vaarwel, Harry," sê Hestia en gryp ook sy hand vas. "Ons gedagtes gaan saam met jou."

"Ek hoop alles werk oukei uit," sê Harry en loer na tant Petunia en Dudley.

"O, ek is seker ons gaan op die ou einde beste vriende wees," sê Diggle opgewek en waai met sy hoed soos hy by die vertrek uitgaan. Hestia volg hom.

Dudley maak hom sagkens uit sy ma se kloue los en loop na Harry toe wat 'n drang om hom met towerkrag te dreig, moet onderdruk. Dan hou Dudley sy groot pienk hand uit.

"Demmit, Dudley," sê Harry oor tant Petunia se hernieude snikke, "het die Dementors 'n ander persoonlikheid in jou ingeblaas?"

"Weetie," mompel Dudley. "Sien jou, Harry."

"Ja . . ." sê Harry toe hy Dudley se hand neem en dit skud. "Miskien. Wees versigtig, Groot D."

Dudley glimlag amper en loop dan log by die vertrek uit. Harry hoor sy swaar voetstappe oor die oprit se gruis en dan klap 'n motor se deur toe.

Tant Petunia se gesig was tot nou toe in haar sakdoek begrawe. Sy kyk om toe sy die klank hoor. Dit lyk nie of sy verwag het om alleen by Harry agter te bly nie. Sy druk haar nat sakdoek haastig in haar sak en sê: "Wel – tot siens," en marsjeer na die deur toe sonder om na hom te kyk.

"Tot siens," sê Harry.

Sy stop en kyk terug. Vir 'n oomblik kry Harry die vreemdste gevoel dat sy iets vir hom wil sê: sy kyk hom eienaardig en bewend aan en dit lyk of sy op die punt is om iets te sê, maar dan loop sy met 'n effense ruk van haar kop haastig by die vertrek uit agter haar man en seun aan.

CHAPTER FOUR



THE SEVEN POTTERS

Harry ran back upstairs to his bedroom, arriving at the window just in time to see the Dursleys' car swinging out of the drive and off up the road. Dedalus's top hat was visible between Aunt Petunia and Dudley in the backseat. The car turned right at the end of Privet Drive, its windows burned scarlet for a moment in the now setting sun, and then it was gone.

Harry picked up Hedwig's cage, his Firebolt, and his rucksack, gave his unnaturally tidy bedroom one last sweeping look, and then made his ungainly way back downstairs to the hall, where he deposited cage, broomstick, and bag near the foot of the stairs. The light was fading rapidly now, the hall full of shadows in the evening light. It felt most strange to stand here in the silence and know that he

was about to leave the house for the last time. Long ago, when he had been left alone while the Dursleys went out to enjoy themselves, the hours of solitude had been a rare treat: Pausing only to sneak something tasty from the fridge, he had rushed upstairs to play on Dudley's computer, or put on the television and flicked through the channels to his heart's content. It gave him an odd, empty feeling to remember those times; it was like remembering a younger brother whom he had lost.

"Don't you want to take a last look at the place?" he asked Hedwig, who was still sulking with her head under her wing. "We'll never be here again. Don't you want to remember all the good times? I mean, look at this doormat. What memories . . . Dudley puked on it after I saved him from the dementors. . . . Turns out he was grateful after all, can you believe it? . . . And last summer, Dumbledore walked through that front door. . . ."

Harry lost the thread of his thoughts for a moment and Hedwig did nothing to help him retrieve it, but continued to sit with her head under her wing. Harry turned his back on the front door.

"And under here, Hedwig" — Harry pulled open a door under the stairs — "is where I used to sleep! You never knew me then — Blimey, it's small, I'd forgotten. . . ."

Harry looked around at the stacked shoes and umbrellas, remembering how he used to wake every morning looking up at the underside of the staircase, which was more often than not adorned with a spider or two. Those had been the days before he had known anything about his true identity; before he had found out how his parents had died or why such strange things often happened around

him. But Harry could still remember the dreams that had dogged him, even in those days: confused dreams involving flashes of green light and once — Uncle Vernon had nearly crashed the car when Harry had recounted it — a flying motorbike . . .

There was a sudden, deafening roar from somewhere nearby. Harry straightened up with a jerk and smacked the top of his head on the low door frame. Pausing only to employ a few of Uncle Vernon's choicest swear words, he staggered back into the kitchen, clutching his head and staring out of the window into the back garden.

The darkness seemed to be rippling, the air itself quivering. Then, one by one, figures began to pop into sight as their Disillusionment Charms lifted. Dominating the scene was Hagrid, wearing a helmet and goggles and sitting astride an enormous motorbike with a black sidecar attached. All around him other people were dismounting from brooms and, in two cases, skeletal, black winged horses.

Wrenching open the back door, Harry hurtled into their midst. There was a general cry of greeting as Hermione flung her arms around him, Ron clapped him on the back, and Hagrid said, "All righ', Harry? Ready fer the off?"

"Definitely," said Harry, beaming around at them all. "But I wasn't expecting this many of you!"

"Change of plan," growled Mad-Eye, who was holding two enormous, bulging sacks, and whose magical eye was spinning from darkening sky to house to garden with dizzying rapidity. "Let's get undercover before we talk you through it."

Harry led them all back into the kitchen where, laughing and chattering, they settled on chairs, sat themselves upon Aunt Petunia's

gleaming work surfaces, or leaned up against her spotless appliances: Ron, long and lanky; Hermione, her bushy hair tied back in a long plait; Fred and George, grinning identically; Bill, badly scarred and long-haired; Mr. Weasley, kind-faced, balding, his spectacles a little awry; Mad-Eye, battle-worn, one-legged, his bright blue magical eye whizzing in its socket; Tonks, whose short hair was her favorite shade of bright pink; Lupin, grayer, more lined; Fleur, slender and beautiful, with her long silvery blonde hair; Kingsley, bald, black, broad-shouldered; Hagrid, with his wild hair and beard, standing hunchbacked to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling; and Mundungus Fletcher, small, dirty, and hangdog, with his droopy basset hound's eyes and matted hair. Harry's heart seemed to expand and glow at the sight: He felt incredibly fond of all of them, even Mundungus, whom he had tried to strangle the last time they had met.

"Kingsley, I thought you were looking after the Muggle Prime Minister?" he called across the room.

"He can get along without me for one night," said Kingsley. "You're more important."

"Harry, guess what?" said Tonks from her perch on top of the washing machine, and she wiggled her left hand at him; a ring glittered there.

"You got married?" Harry yelped, looking from her to Lupin.

"I'm sorry you couldn't be there, Harry, it was very quiet."

"That's brilliant, congrat —"

"All right, all right, we'll have time for a cozy catch-up later!" roared Moody over the hubbub, and silence fell in the kitchen.

Moody dropped his sacks at his feet and turned to Harry. "As Dedalus probably told you, we had to abandon Plan A. Pius Thicknesse has gone over, which gives us a big problem. He's made it an imprisonable offense to connect this house to the Floo Network, place a Portkey here, or Apparate in or out. All done in the name of your protection, to prevent You-Know-Who getting in at you. Absolutely pointless, seeing as your mother's charm does that already. What he's really done is to stop you getting out of here safely.

"Second problem: You're underage, which means you've still got the Trace on you."

"I don't —"

"The Trace, the Trace!" said Mad-Eye impatiently. "The charm that detects magical activity around under-seventeens, the way the Ministry finds out about underage magic! If you, or anyone around you, casts a spell to get you out of here, Thicknesse is going to know about it, and so will the Death Eaters.

"We can't wait for the Trace to break, because the moment you turn seventeen you'll lose all the protection your mother gave you. In short: Pius Thicknesse thinks he's got you cornered good and proper."

Harry could not help but agree with the unknown Thicknesse.

"So what are we going to do?"

"We're going to use the only means of transport left to us, the only ones the Trace can't detect, because we don't need to cast spells to use them: brooms, thestrals, and Hagrid's motorbike."

Harry could see flaws in this plan; however, he held his tongue to

give Mad-Eye the chance to address them.

"Now, your mother's charm will only break under two conditions: when you come of age, or" — Moody gestured around the pristine kitchen — "you no longer call this place home. You and your aunt and uncle are going your separate ways tonight, in the full understanding that you're never going to live together again, correct?"

Harry nodded.

"So this time, when you leave, there'll be no going back, and the charm will break the moment you get outside its range. We're choosing to break it early, because the alternative is waiting for You-Know-Who to come and seize you the moment you turn seventeen.

"The one thing we've got on our side is that You-Know-Who doesn't know we're moving you tonight. We've leaked a fake trail to the Ministry: They think you're not leaving until the thirtieth. However, this is You-Know-Who we're dealing with, so we can't just rely on him getting the date wrong; he's bound to have a couple of Death Eaters patrolling the skies in this general area, just in case. So, we've given a dozen different houses every protection we can throw at them. They all look like they could be the place we're going to hide you, they've all got some connection with the Order: my house, Kingsley's place, Molly's Auntie Muriel's — you get the idea."

"Yeah," said Harry, not entirely truthfully, because he could still spot a gaping hole in the plan.

"You'll be going to Tonks's parents. Once you're within the boundaries of the protective enchantments we've put on their house,

you'll be able to use a Portkey to the Burrow. Any questions?"

"Er — yes," said Harry. "Maybe they won't know which of the twelve secure houses I'm heading for at first, but won't it be sort of obvious once" — he performed a quick headcount — "fourteen of us fly off toward Tonks's parents'?"

"Ah," said Moody, "I forgot to mention the key point. Fourteen of us won't be flying to Tonks's parents'. There will be seven Harry Potters moving through the skies tonight, each of them with a companion, each pair heading for a different safe house."

From inside his cloak Moody now withdrew a flask of what looked like mud. There was no need for him to say another word; Harry understood the rest of the plan immediately.

"No!" he said loudly, his voice ringing through the kitchen. "No way!"

"I told them you'd take it like this," said Hermione with a hint of complacency.

"If you think I'm going to let six people risk their lives — !"

"— because it's the first time for all of us," said Ron.

"This is different, pretending to be me —"

"Well, none of us really fancy it, Harry," said Fred earnestly. "Imagine if something went wrong and we were stuck as specky, scrawny gits forever."

Harry did not smile.

"You can't do it if I don't cooperate, you need me to give you some hair."

"Well, that's that plan scuppered," said George. "Obviously there's no chance at all of us getting a bit of your hair unless you

cooperate."

"Yeah, thirteen of us against one bloke who's not allowed to use magic; we've got no chance," said Fred.

"Funny," said Harry, "really amusing."

"If it has to come to force, then it will," growled Moody, his magical eye now quivering a little in its socket as he glared at Harry. "Everyone here's overage, Potter, and they're all prepared to take the risk."

Mundungus shrugged and grimaced; the magical eye swerved sideways to glare at him out of the side of Moody's head.

"Let's have no more arguments. Time's wearing on. I want a few of your hairs, boy, now."

"But this is mad, there's no need —"

"No need!" snarled Moody. "With You-Know-Who out there and half the Ministry on his side? Potter, if we're lucky he'll have swallowed the fake bait and he'll be planning to ambush you on the thirtieth, but he'd be mad not to have a Death Eater or two keeping an eye out, it's what I'd do. They might not be able to get at you or this house while your mother's charm holds, but it's about to break and they know the rough position of the place. Our only chance is to use decoys. Even You-Know-Who can't split himself into seven."

Harry caught Hermione's eye and looked away at once.

"So, Potter — some of your hair, if you please."

Harry glanced at Ron, who grimaced at him in a just-do-it sort of way.

"Now!" barked Moody.

With all of their eyes upon him, Harry reached up to the top of his

head, grabbed a hank of hair, and pulled.

"Good," said Moody, limping forward as he pulled the stopper out of the flask of potion. "Straight in here, if you please."

Harry dropped the hair into the mudlike liquid. The moment it made contact with its surface, the potion began to froth and smoke, then, all at once, it turned a clear, bright gold.

"Ooh, you look much tastier than Crabbe and Goyle, Harry," said Hermione, before catching sight of Ron's raised eyebrows, blushing slightly, and saying, "Oh, you know what I mean — Goyle's potion looked like bogies."

"Right then, fake Potters line up over here, please," said Moody.

Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, and Fleur lined up in front of Aunt Petunia's gleaming sink.

"We're one short," said Lupin.

"Here," said Hagrid gruffly, and he lifted Mundungus by the scruff of the neck and dropped him down beside Fleur, who wrinkled her nose pointedly and moved along to stand between Fred and George instead.

"I've toldjer, I'd sooner be a protector," said Mundungus.

"Shut it," growled Moody. "As I've already told you, you spineless worm, any Death Eaters we run into will be aiming to capture Potter, not kill him. Dumbledore always said You-Know-Who would want to finish Potter in person. It'll be the protectors who have got the most to worry about, the Death Eaters'll want to kill them."

Mundungus did not look particularly reassured, but Moody was already pulling half a dozen eggcup-sized glasses from inside his

cloak, which he handed out, before pouring a little Polyjuice Potion into each one.

"Altogether, then . . ."

Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, Fleur, and Mundungus drank. All of them gasped and grimaced as the potion hit their throats: At once, their features began to bubble and distort like hot wax. Hermione and Mundungus were shooting upward; Ron, Fred, and George were shrinking; their hair was darkening, Hermione's and Fleur's appearing to shoot backward into their skulls.

Moody, quite unconcerned, was now loosening the ties of the large sacks he had brought with him. When he straightened up again, there were six Harry Potters gasping and panting in front of him.

Fred and George turned to each other and said together, "Wow — we're identical!"

"I dunno, though, I think I'm still better-looking," said Fred, examining his reflection in the kettle.

"Bah," said Fleur, checking herself in the microwave door, "Bill, don't look at me — I'm 'ideous."

"Those whose clothes are a bit roomy, I've got smaller here," said Moody, indicating the first sack, "and vice versa. Don't forget the glasses, there's six pairs in the side pocket. And when you're dressed, there's luggage in the other sack."

The real Harry thought that this might just be the most bizarre thing he had ever seen, and he had seen some extremely odd things. He watched as his six doppelgangers rummaged in the sacks, pulling out sets of clothes, putting on glasses, stuffing their own things away. He felt like asking them to show a little more respect for his privacy as

they all began stripping off with impunity, clearly much more at ease with displaying his body than they would have been with their own.

"I knew Ginny was lying about that tattoo," said Ron, looking down at his bare chest.

"Harry, your eyesight really is awful," said Hermione, as she put on glasses.

Once dressed, the fake Harrys took rucksacks and owl cages, each containing a stuffed snowy owl, from the second sack.

"Good," said Moody, as at last seven dressed, bespectacled, and luggage-laden Harrys faced him. "The pairs will be as follows: Mundungus will be traveling with me, by broom —"

"Why'm I with you?" grunted the Harry nearest the back door.

"Because you're the one that needs watching," growled Moody, and sure enough, his magical eye did not waver from Mundungus as he continued, "Arthur and Fred —"

"I'm George," said the twin at whom Moody was pointing. "Can't you even tell us apart when we're Harry?"

"Sorry, George —"

"I'm only yanking your wand, I'm Fred really —"

"Enough messing around!" snarled Moody. "The other one — George or Fred or whoever you are — you're with Remus. Miss Delacour —"

"I'm taking Fleur on a thestral," said Bill. "She's not that fond of brooms."

Fleur walked over to stand beside him, giving him a soppy, slavish look that Harry hoped with all his heart would never appear on his face again.

"Miss Granger with Kingsley, again by thestral —"

Hermione looked reassured as she answered Kingsley's smile; Harry knew that Hermione too lacked confidence on a broomstick.

"Which leaves you and me, Ron!" said Tonks brightly, knocking over a mug tree as she waved at him.

Ron did not look quite as pleased as Hermione.

"An' you're with me, Harry. That all righ'?" said Hagrid, looking a little anxious. "We'll be on the bike, brooms an' thestrals can't take me weight, see. Not a lot o' room on the seat with me on it, though, so you'll be in the sidecar."

"That's great," said Harry, not altogether truthfully.

"We think the Death Eaters will expect you to be on a broom," said Moody, who seemed to guess how Harry was feeling. "Snape's had plenty of time to tell them everything about you he's never mentioned before, so if we do run into any Death Eaters, we're betting they'll choose one of the Potters who look at home on a broomstick. All right then," he went on, tying up the sack with the fake Potters' clothes in it and leading the way back to the door, "I make it three minutes until we're supposed to leave. No point locking the back door, it won't keep the Death Eaters out when they come looking. . . . Come on. . . ."

Harry hurried into the hall to fetch his rucksack, Firebolt, and Hedwig's cage before joining the others in the dark back garden. On every side broomsticks were leaping into hands; Hermione had already been helped up onto a great black thestral by Kingsley, Fleur onto the other by Bill. Hagrid was standing ready beside the motorbike, goggles on.

"Is this it? Is this Sirius's bike?"

"The very same," said Hagrid, beaming down at Harry. "An' the last time yeh was on it, Harry, I could fit yeh in one hand!"

Harry could not help but feel a little humiliated as he got into the sidecar. It placed him several feet below everybody else: Ron smirked at the sight of him sitting there like a child in a bumper car. Harry stuffed his rucksack and broomstick down by his feet and rammed Hedwig's cage between his knees. It was extremely uncomfortable.

"Arthur's done a bit o' tinkerin'," said Hagrid, quite oblivious to Harry's discomfort. He settled himself astride the motorcycle, which creaked slightly and sank inches into the ground. "It's got a few tricks up its handlebars now. Tha' one was my idea."

He pointed a thick finger at a purple button near the speedometer.

"Please be careful, Hagrid," said Mr. Weasley, who was standing beside them, holding his broomstick. "I'm still not sure that was advisable and it's certainly only to be used in emergencies."

"All right then," said Moody. "Everyone ready, please; I want us all to leave at exactly the same time or the whole point of the diversion's lost."

Everybody mounted their brooms.

"Hold tight now, Ron," said Tonks, and Harry saw Ron throw a furtive, guilty look at Lupin before placing his hands on either side of her waist. Hagrid kicked the motorbike into life: It roared like a dragon, and the sidecar began to vibrate.

"Good luck, everyone," shouted Moody. "See you all in about an hour at the Burrow. On the count of three. One . . . two . . . THREE."

There was a great roar from the motorbike, and Harry felt the sidecar give a nasty lurch: He was rising through the air fast, his eyes watering slightly, hair whipped back off his face. Around him brooms were soaring upward too; the long black tail of a thestral flicked past. His legs, jammed into the sidecar by Hedwig's cage and his rucksack, were already sore and starting to go numb. So great was his discomfort that he almost forgot to take a last glimpse of number four, Privet Drive; by the time he looked over the edge of the sidecar he could no longer tell which one it was. Higher and higher they climbed into the sky —

And then, out of nowhere, out of nothing, they were surrounded. At least thirty hooded figures, suspended in midair, formed a vast circle in the midst of which the Order members had risen, oblivious —

Screams, a blaze of green light on every side: Hagrid gave a yell and the motorbike rolled over. Harry lost any sense of where they were: Streetlights above him, yells around him, he was clinging to the sidecar for dear life. Hedwig's cage, the Firebolt, and his rucksack slipped from beneath his knees —

"No — HEDWIG!"

The broomstick spun to earth, but he just managed to seize the strap of his rucksack and the top of the cage as the motorbike swung the right way up again. A second's relief, and then another burst of green light. The owl screeched and fell to the floor of the cage.

"No — NO!"

The motorbike zoomed forward; Harry glimpsed hooded Death Eaters scattering as Hagrid blasted through their circle.

"Hedwig — *Hedwig* —"

But the owl lay motionless and pathetic as a toy on the floor of her cage. He could not take it in, and his terror for the others was paramount. He glanced over his shoulder and saw a mass of people moving, flares of green light, two pairs of people on brooms soaring off into the distance, but he could not tell who they were —

"Hagrid, we've got to go back, we've got to go back!" he yelled over the thunderous roar of the engine, pulling out his wand, ramming Hedwig's cage onto the floor, refusing to believe that she was dead. "Hagrid, TURN AROUND!"

"My job's ter get you there safe, Harry!" bellowed Hagrid, and he opened the throttle.

"Stop — STOP!" Harry shouted, but as he looked back again two jets of green light flew past his left ear: Four Death Eaters had broken away from the circle and were pursuing them, aiming for Hagrid's broad back. Hagrid swerved, but the Death Eaters were keeping up with the bike; more curses shot after them, and Harry had to sink low into the sidecar to avoid them. Wriggling around he cried, *"Stupefy!"* and a red bolt of light shot from his own wand, cleaving a gap between the four pursuing Death Eaters as they scattered to avoid it.

"Hold on, Harry, this'll do for 'em!" roared Hagrid, and Harry looked up just in time to see Hagrid slamming a thick finger into a green button near the fuel gauge.

A wall, a solid brick wall, erupted out of the exhaust pipe. Craning his neck, Harry saw it expand into being in midair. Three of the Death Eaters swerved and avoided it, but the fourth was not so lucky: He vanished from view and then dropped like a boulder from behind

it, his broomstick broken into pieces. One of his fellows slowed up to save him, but they and the airborne wall were swallowed by darkness as Hagrid leaned low over the handlebars and sped up.

More Killing Curses flew past Harry's head from the two remaining Death Eaters' wands; they were aiming for Hagrid. Harry responded with further Stunning Spells: Red and green collided in midair in a shower of multicolored sparks, and Harry thought wildly of fireworks, and the Muggles below who would have no idea what was happening —

"Here we go again, Harry, hold on!" yelled Hagrid, and he jabbed at a second button. This time a great net burst from the bike's exhaust, but the Death Eaters were ready for it. Not only did they swerve to avoid it, but the companion who had slowed to save their unconscious friend had caught up. He bloomed suddenly out of the darkness and now three of them were pursuing the motorbike, all shooting curses after it.

"This'll do it, Harry, hold on tight!" yelled Hagrid, and Harry saw him slam his whole hand onto the purple button beside the speedometer.

With an unmistakable bellowing roar, dragon fire burst from the exhaust, white-hot and blue, and the motorbike shot forward like a bullet with a sound of wrenching metal. Harry saw the Death Eaters swerve out of sight to avoid the deadly trail of flame, and at the same time felt the sidecar sway ominously: Its metal connections to the bike had splintered with the force of acceleration.

"It's all righ', Harry!" bellowed Hagrid, now thrown flat onto his back by the surge of speed; nobody was steering now, and the sidecar

was starting to twist violently in the bike's slipstream.

"I'm on it, Harry, don' worry!" Hagrid yelled, and from inside his jacket pocket he pulled his flowery pink umbrella.

"Hagrid! No! Let me!"

"REPARO!"

There was a deafening bang and the sidecar broke away from the bike completely: Harry sped forward, propelled by the impetus of the bike's flight, then the sidecar began to lose height —

In desperation Harry pointed his wand at the sidecar and shouted, *"Wingardium Leviosa!"*

The sidecar rose like a cork, unsteerable but at least still airborne: He had but a split second's relief, however, as more curses streaked past him: The three Death Eaters were closing in.

"I'm comin', Harry!" Hagrid yelled from out of the darkness, but Harry could feel the sidecar beginning to sink again: Crouching as low as he could, he pointed at the middle of the oncoming figures and yelled, *"Impedimenta!"*

The jinx hit the middle Death Eater in the chest: For a moment the man was absurdly spread-eagled in midair as though he had hit an invisible barrier: One of his fellows almost collided with him —

Then the sidecar began to fall in earnest, and the remaining Death Eater shot a curse so close to Harry that he had to duck below the rim of the car, knocking out a tooth on the edge of his seat —

"I'm comin', Harry, I'm comin'!"

A huge hand seized the back of Harry's robes and hoisted him out of the plummeting sidecar; Harry pulled his rucksack with him as he dragged himself onto the motorbike's seat and found himself back-to-

back with Hagrid. As they soared upward, away from the two remaining Death Eaters, Harry spat blood out of his mouth, pointed his wand at the falling sidecar, and yelled, "*Confringo!*"

He knew a dreadful, gut-wrenching pang for Hedwig as it exploded; the Death Eater nearest it was blasted off his broom and fell from sight; his companion fell back and vanished.

"Harry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," moaned Hagrid, "I shouldn'ta tried ter repair it meself — yeh've got no room —"

"It's not a problem, just keep flying!" Harry shouted back, as two more Death Eaters emerged out of the darkness, drawing closer.

As the curses came shooting across the intervening space again, Hagrid swerved and zigzagged: Harry knew that Hagrid did not dare use the dragon-fire button again, with Harry seated so insecurely. Harry sent Stunning Spell after Stunning Spell back at their pursuers, barely holding them off. He shot another blocking jinx at them: The closest Death Eater swerved to avoid it and his hood slipped, and by the red light of his next Stunning Spell, Harry saw the strangely blank face of Stanley Shunpike — Stan —

"*Expelliarmus!*" Harry yelled.

"That's him, it's him, it's the real one!"

The hooded Death Eater's shout reached Harry even above the thunder of the motorbike's engine: Next moment, both pursuers had fallen back and disappeared from view.

"Harry, what's happened?" bellowed Hagrid. "Where've they gone?"

"I don't know!"

But Harry was afraid: The hooded Death Eater had shouted "It's

the real one!”; how had he known? He gazed around at the apparently empty darkness and felt its menace. Where were they?

He clambered around on the seat to face forward and seized hold of the back of Hagrid’s jacket.

“Hagrid, do the dragon-fire thing again, let’s get out of here!”

“Hold on tight, then, Harry!”

There was a deafening, screeching roar again and the white-blue fire shot from the exhaust: Harry felt himself slipping backward off what little of the seat he had, Hagrid flung backward upon him, barely maintaining his grip on the handlebars —

“I think we’ve lost ’em Harry, I think we’ve done it!” yelled Hagrid.

But Harry was not convinced: Fear lapped at him as he looked left and right for pursuers he was sure would come. . . . Why had they fallen back? One of them had still had a wand. . . . *It’s him . . . it’s the real one*. . . . They had said it right after he had tried to Disarm Stan. . . .

“We’re nearly there, Harry, we’ve nearly made it!” shouted Hagrid.

Harry felt the bike drop a little, though the lights down on the ground still seemed remote as stars.

Then the scar on his forehead burned like fire; as a Death Eater appeared on either side of the bike, two Killing Curses missed Harry by millimeters, cast from behind —

And then Harry saw him. Voldemort was flying like smoke on the wind, without broomstick or thestral to hold him, his snakelike face gleaming out of the blackness, his white fingers raising his wand

again —

Hagrid let out a bellow of fear and steered the motorbike into a vertical dive. Clinging on for dear life, Harry sent Stunning Spells flying at random into the whirling night. He saw a body fly past him and knew he had hit one of them, but then he heard a bang and saw sparks from the engine; the motorbike spiraled through the air, completely out of control —

Green jets of light shot past them again. Harry had no idea which way was up, which down: His scar was still burning; he expected to die at any second. A hooded figure on a broomstick was feet from him, he saw it raise its arm —

"NO!"

With a shout of fury Hagrid launched himself off the bike at the Death Eater; to his horror, Harry saw both Hagrid and the Death Eater falling out of sight, their combined weight too much for the broomstick —

Barely gripping the plummeting bike with his knees, Harry heard Voldemort scream, *"Mine!"*

It was over: He could not see or hear where Voldemort was; he glimpsed another Death Eater swooping out of the way and heard, *"Avada —"*

As the pain from Harry's scar forced his eyes shut, his wand acted of its own accord. He felt it drag his hand around like some great magnet, saw a spurt of golden fire through his half-closed eyelids, heard a crack and a scream of fury. The remaining Death Eater yelled; Voldemort screamed, *"No!"*: Somehow, Harry found his nose an inch from the dragon-fire button. He punched it with his wand-free

hand and the bike shot more flames into the air, hurtling straight toward the ground.

"Hagrid!" Harry called, holding on to the bike for dear life. "Hagrid — *Accio Hagrid!*"

The motorbike sped up, sucked toward the earth. Face level with the handlebars, Harry could see nothing but distant lights growing nearer and nearer: He was going to crash and there was nothing he could do about it. Behind him came another scream, *"Your wand, Selwyn, give me your wand!"*

He felt Voldemort before he saw him. Looking sideways, he stared into the red eyes and was sure they would be the last thing he ever saw: Voldemort preparing to curse him once more —

And then Voldemort vanished. Harry looked down and saw Hagrid spread-eagled on the ground below him. He pulled hard at the handlebars to avoid hitting him, groped for the brake, but with an earsplitting, ground-trembling crash, he smashed into a muddy pond.

Die Sewe Potters

Harry hardloop op na sy kamer toe en kom net betyds by die venster om te sien hoe die Dursleys se motor by die erf uitdraai en met die straat af ry. Dedalus se bolhoed is sigbaar tussen tant Petunia en Dudley op die agterste sitplek. Die motor draai regs aan die einde van Ligusterlaan met ruite wat vir 'n oomblik helderrooi brand in die ondergaande son, en dan is dit weg.

Harry tel Hedwig se hok, sy Vuurslag en rugsak op, laat gly sy oë vir oulaas oor sy onnatuurlik netjiese slaapkamer en beweeg dan lomp af na die voorportaal toe waar hy die hok, besemstok en sak naby die voet van die trap neersit. Die lig kwyn nou vinnig en die portaal is vol skaduwees in die aandlig. Dit voel baie vreemd om hier in die stilte te staan en te weet hy is op die punt om hierdie huis vir die laaste keer te verlaat. Lank gelede, as die Dursleys uitgegaan het om pret te hê en hom alleen hier gelos het, was die ure van eensaamheid 'n seldsame plesier: hy het altyd eers gou iets lekkers uit die yskas gaan gaps en dan vinnig boontoe gehardloop om op Dudley se rekenaar te gaan speel, of die televisie aangeskakel en na hartelus deur die kanale gerits. Dit laat hom op 'n eienaardige manier leeg voel om aan daardie tye terug te dink; dit is soos om 'n jonger broer wat hy verloor het, te onthou.

"Wil jy nie vir oulaas na die plek kyk nie?" vra hy vir Hedwig wat nog steeds nukkerig met haar kop onder haar vlerk sit. "Ons gaan nooit weer hiernatoe kom nie. Wil jy nie al die goeie tye onthou nie? Ek bedoel, kyk hierdie deurmat. Watter herinneringe . . . Dudley het daarop naar geword nadat ek hom van die Dementors gered het . . . Hy was toe op die ou end tog dankbaar, kan jy dit glo? . . . En laas somer het Dumbledore daar by die voordeur ingeloop . . ."

Harry verloor die draad van sy gedagtegang vir 'n oomblik en Hedwig doen niks om hom te help om dit terug te kry nie, maar hou aan om met haar kop onder haar vlerk te sit. Harry draai sy rug op die voordeur.

"En hieronder, Hedwig –" Harry maak 'n deur onder die trap

oop "– hier het ek eers geslaap! Jy het my nie toe geken nie – demmit, ek't al vergeet hoe klein dit is . . ."

Harry kyk na die opgestapelde skoene en sambrele en onthou hoe hy elke oggend wakker geword en opgekyk het na die onderkant van die trap wat dikwels met 'n spinnekop of twee versier was. Dit was die dae voor hy enigiets van sy ware identiteit af geweet het; voor hy uitgevind het hoe sy ouers dood is of hoekom sulke vreemde dinge dikwels om hom gebeur. Harry onthou nog die drome wat hom so gery het, selfs in daardie dae: verwarde drome van 'n flikkerende groen lig en eenkeer – oom Vernon het die motor amper omgegooi toe Harry hulle daarvan vertel – 'n vlieënde motorfiets . . .

Daar is skielik 'n oorverdowende gebulder van iewers naby. Harry kom met 'n ruk regop en kap sy kop teen die lae deurraam. Hy laat los 'n paar van oom Vernon se geliefkoosde swetswoorde en strompel dan terug na die kombuis terwyl hy sy kop vashou en deur die venster na die agtertuin toe uitkyk.

Dit lyk of die donkerte tril en die lug bewe. Dan begin figure een vir een skielik te voorskyn kom soos hulle Ontgogelingstowerspreuke opgehef word. Die toneel word oorheers deur Hagrid wat 'n valhelm en skermbril dra en wydsbeen op 'n enorme motorfiets sit waaraan daar 'n swart syspan vas is. Oral om hom klim ander mense van besemstokke af en, in twee gevalle, van uitgeteerde swart gevleuelde perde.

Harry pluk die agterdeur oop en storm tussen hulle in. Daar is uitroepe soos almal tegelyk groet. Hermione gooi haar arms om hom, Ron klop hom op die rug en Hagrid sê: "Als orraait, Harry? Reg om te waai?"

"Definitief," sê Harry en kyk stralend na almal om hom. "Maar ek het nie so baie van julle verwag nie!"

"Plan het verander," grom Maloog wat twee yslike, bultende sakke vashou terwyl sy getoorde oog teen 'n duiselingwekkende spoed van die donker wordende lug na die huis na die tuin draai. "Kom ons gaan onderdak voor ons vir jou verduidelik."

Harry lei hulle almal terug na die kombuis waar hulle laggend en geselsend op stoele gaan sit en hulle tuis maak op tant Petunia se glinsterende werksoppervlakke of teen haar silwerskoon toestelle leun: Ron, lank en skraal; Hermione wie se dik hare in 'n lang vlegsel teruggevat is; Fred en George wat identies grinnik; Bill met sy lelike letsels en lang hare; meneer Weasley wat bles word en wie se bril effens skeef op sy goedige gesig sit; Maloog, gevegvoos, met een been en 'n helderblou getoorde oog wat in sy kas rondwoer; Tonks wie se kort hare haar gunstelingskakering van ligpienk is; Lupin, gryser en met meer plooie; Fleur, slank en beeldskoon, met haar

lang silwerblonde hare; Kingsley, bles, swart, met breë skouers; Hagrid met sy wilde hare en baard wat boggelrug staan sodat hy nie sy kop teen die plafon kap nie, en Mundungus Fletcher, klein, vuil en kop onderstebo, met sy verlepte bassethondoë en gekoekte hare. Dit voel vir Harry of sy hart swel en gloei terwyl hy na hulle kyk: hy is ongelooflik lief vir almal van hulle, selfs vir Mundungus wat hy probeer verwurg het toe hulle mekaar laas gesien het.

"Kingsley, ek dog jy pas die Moggel Eerste Minister op?" roep hy oor die vertrek uit.

"Hy kan vir een aand sonder my klaarkom," sê Kingsley. "Jy's belangriker."

"Harry, raai wat?' sê Tonks van waar sy bo-op die wasmasjien sit. Sy wikkel haar linkerhand vir hom en hy sien 'n ring blik.

"Julle's getroud?" gil Harry en kyk van haar na Lupin.

"Ek's jammer jy kon nie daar wees nie, Harry, dit was 'n baie stil troue."

"Dis fantasties. Gelu–"

"Toe nou, toe nou, ons sal later tyd hê vir gesellige geselsie!" brul Moody bo die lawaai en dit word stil in die kombuis. Moody sit die sakke by sy voete neer en draai na Harry. "Soos Dedalus waarskynlik vir jou gesê het, moes ons Plan A laat vaar. Pius Thicknesse het oorgeloop, wat vir ons 'n groot probleem skep. Hy het dit 'n misdaad gemaak met tronkstraf wat gepaardgaan as hierdie huis met die Floo-netwerk verbind óf 'n Poortsleutel hier geplaas word, óf hier in of uit te Appareer. Dis alles gedoen om jou te beskerm, en kamtig te keer dat Jy-Weet-Wie jou kan bykom. Maar dis absoluut sinneloos, aangesien jou ma se towerspreuk dit reeds doen. Wat hy eintlik gedoen het, is om te verhoed dat jy veilig hier wegkom.

"Tweede probleem: jy's minderjarig, wat beteken jy het nog steeds die Spoor op jou."

"Maar ek –"

"Die Spoor, die Spoor!" sê Maloog ongeduldig. "Die towerspreuk wat toordery onder ondersewentienjariges bespeur, die Ministerie se manier om minderjarige towery op te spoor! As jy of enigiemand om jou towerkrag gebruik om jou hier uit te kry, gaan Thicknesse daarvan weet, en die Doodseters ook.

"Ons kan nie wag tot die Spoor opgehef word nie, want die oomblik dat jy sewentien word, verloor jy al die beskerming wat jou ma vir jou gegee het. Kortom, Pius Thicknesse dink hy't jou deeglik en behoorlik in 'n hoek vas."

Harry kan nie help om met die onbekende Thicknesse saam te stem nie.

"So wat gaan ons doen?"

"Ons gaan die enigste vervoermiddels wat daar vir ons oorbly, gebruik: die enigstes wat die Spoor nie kan bespeur nie, want ons het nie towerkrag nodig om hulle te gebruik nie: besems, Testralle en Hagrid se motorfiets."

Harry kan gebreke in hierdie plan sien, maar hy hou sy mond sodat Maloog kan klaar praat.

"Nou kyk, jou ma se towerspreuk sal net in twee gevalle verbreek word: wanneer jy sewentien word of –" Moody beduie na die silwerskoon kombuis, "– as hierdie plek nie meer jou tuiste is nie. Jy en jou tante en oom is vanaand uitmekaar met die volle verstandhouding dat julle nooit weer sal saamwoon nie, korrek?"

Harry knik.

"So wanneer jy dié keer weggaan, kan jy nie terugdraai nie en die towerspreuk sal verbreek word die oomblik dat jy buite sy trefafstand gaan. Ons verkies om dit vroeër te verbreek, want die alternatief is om te wag dat Jy-Weet-Wie jou in die hande kry sodra jy sewentien word.

"Die enigste ding wat in ons guns tel, is dat Jy-Weet-Wie nie weet ons gaan jou vanaand hier wegvat nie. Ons het 'n dwaalspoor by die Ministerie gelek: hulle dink jy gee eers die dertigste hier pad. Nogtans, ons het hier met Jy-Weet-Wie te doen, so ons kan nie net aanvaar hy gaan die datum verkeerd kry nie; hy sal ongetwyfeld dat 'n paar Doodseters die hemelruim in hierdie omgewing patrolleer, net ingeval. So, ons het vir 'n dosyn verskillende huise elke moontlike beskerming in ons vermoë gegee. Hulle lyk almal asof dit die plek kan wees waar ons jou gaan wegsteek en hulle is almal op 'n manier aan die Orde verbind: my huis, Kingsley se plek, Molly se tant Muriel s'n – jy verstaan."

"Ja," sê Harry, nie heeltemal eerlik nie, want hy sien nog steeds 'n yslike gebrek in die plan.

"Jy gaan na Tonks se ouers toe. Sodra jy binne die grense van die beskermende paljasse is wat ons op hulle huis geplaas het, sal jy 'n Poortsleutel na Die Konynenes toe kan gebruik. Enige vrae?"

"E – ja," sê Harry. "Miskien sal hulle vir eers nie weet na watter een van die twaalf huise ek gaan nie, maar dit sal mos soort van duidelik wees as –" hy tel vinnig hoeveel koppe daar is "– veertien van ons na Tonks se ouers se plek toe vlieg."

"A," sê Moody, "ek het vergeet om die sleutelpunt te noem. Veertien van ons gaan nie na Tonks se ouers toe vlieg nie. Daar gaan vanaand sewe Harry Potters deur die hemelruim beweeg, elkeen van hulle met 'n metgesel en elke paar op pad na 'n ander skuilhuis."

Moody haal nou 'n fles vol goed wat na modder lyk uit sy mantel. Dit is nie nodig om enigiets meer te sê nie; Harry verstaan die res van die plan onmiddellik.

"Nee!" sê hy hard en sy stem weerklink deur die kombuis. "Nee, vergeet dit!"

"Ek het vir hulle gesê dis wat jy gaan sê," kondig Hermione effens selfvoldaan aan.

"As julle dink ek gaan toelaat dat ses mense hulle lewe waag –!"

"Asof dit die eerste keer vir ons almal is," sê Ron.

"Dis anders hierdie, om te maak of julle ek is –"

"Wel, nie een van ons hou regtig daarvan nie, Harry," sê Fred ernstig. "Sê nou net iets gaan verkeerd en ons bly vir ewig besproete, benerige mamparras?"

Harry glimlag nie.

"Julle kan dit nie doen as ek nie saamwerk nie. Julle't het van my hare nodig."

"Wel, dan is daai plan in sy kanon in," sê George. "Daar's duidelik nie 'n kans dat almal van ons van jou hare gaan kry as jy nie wil saamwerk nie."

"Ja-nee, dertien van ons teen een ou wat nie towerkrag mag gebruik nie; ons het nie 'n kat se kans nie," sê Fred.

"Grappie," sê Harry. "Baie snaaks."

"As ons dan geweld moet gebruik, dan moet ons maar," grom Moody. Sy getoorde oog bewe nou effens in sy kas terwyl hy Harry aangluur. "Almal hier is oor sewentien, Potter, en hulle's almal bereid om die risiko te loop."

Mundungus haal sy skouers op en gryns; die getoorde oog draai sywaarts en gluur hom uit die kant van Moody se kop aan.

"Ons het nou genoeg gestry. Die tyd stap aan. Ek soek 'n paar van jou hare, seun – nou."

"Maar dis malligheid, dis nie nodig om –"

"Nie nodig nie!" snou Moody hom toe. "Met Jy-Weet-Wie daar buite en die helfte van die Ministerie aan sy kant? Potter, as ons gelukkig is, het hy die vals lokaas gesluk en beplan hy om jou op die dertigste voor te lê, maar hy sal waansinnig wees om nie 'n Doodseter of twee 'n ogie oor jou te laat hou nie; dis wat ek sou doen. Hulle kan dalk nie by jou of hierdie huis kom terwyl jou ma se towerspreuk nog van krag is nie, maar dit gaan binnekort verbreek word en hulle weet rofweg waar hierdie plek is. Ons enigste hoop is om lokvoëls te gebruik. Selfs Jy-Weet-Wie kan homself nie in sewe verdeel nie."

Harry vang Hermione se oog en kyk dadelik weg.

"So, Potter – 'n paar van jou hare, asseblief."

Harry loer na Ron, wie se grynslag beteken, doen dit net.

"Nou!" blaf Moody.

Met almal se oë op hom lig Harry sy hand na sy kop, gryp 'n klossie hare en trek.

"Goed," sê Moody en hinkepink vorentoe soos hy die prop uit die fles met die Towerdrankie trek. "Reguit hierin, asseblief."

Harry laat val die hare in die modderige vloeistof. Die oomblik dat dit kontak met die oppervlak maak, begin die Towerdrankie skuim en rook en dan verander dit skielik in 'n deursigtige heldergoud.

"Oe, jy lyk baie smaakliker as Crabbe en Goyle, Harry," sê Hermione. Sy sien Ron verbaas opkyk, bloos effens en voeg by: "Ag, jy weet wat ek bedoel – Goyle se owerdrankie het soos moer gelyk."

"Nou toe, vals Potters, tree hier aan, asseblief," sê Moody.

Ron, Hermione, Fred, George en Fleur kom staan in 'n ry voor tant Petunia se glinsterende wasbak.

"Ons kom een kort," sê Lupin.

"Hier," sê Hagrid stroef. Hy kry Mundungus agter die nek beet, lig hom op en laat val hom langs Fleur wat haar neus vererg optrek en wegbeweeg sodat sy eerder tussen Fred en George staan.

"Ek het jou gesê, ek wil liewer 'n beskermer wees," sê Mundungus.

"Sjarrap," grom Moody. "Soos ek reeds vir jou gesê het, jou ruggraatlose wurm, sal alle Doodseters wat ons teëkom Potter wil gevange neem, nie doodmaak nie. Dumbledore het altyd gesê Jy-Weet-Wie sal persoonlik met Potter wil afreken. Die beskermers sal die meeste bekommernisse hê, die Doodseters sal hulle wil doodmaak."

Mundungus lyk nie besonder gerusgestel nie, maar Moody haal alreeds 'n dosyn eierkelkie-grootte glase uit sy mantel en deel dit uit voor hy 'n bietjie Polisouspaljas in elkeen skink.

"Reg, almal saam . . ."

Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, Fleur en Mundungus drink. Almal van hulle snak na asem en trek gesigte soos die Towerdrankie hulle kele tref. Hulle gelaatstrekke begin onmiddellik borrel en soos warm was verwring. Hermione en Mundungus word langer; Ron, Fred en George krimp; hulle hare word donkerder, Hermione en Fleur s'n lyk of dit agtertoe in hulle skedels in skiet.

Moody steur hom nie aan hulle nie en maak die groot sakke wat hy saam met hom gebring het se knope los. Toe hy weer regop kom, staan daar ses Harry Potters hygend en uitasem voor hom.

Fred en George draai na mekaar toe en sê gelyk: "Maggies – ons is identies!"

"Ek weet nie, jong, ek dink nog steeds ek's aantrekliker," sê Fred terwyl hy sy weerkaatsing in die ketel bestudeer.

"Ba," sê Fleur wat na haarself in die mikrogolf se deur kyk, "moenie na my kyk nie, Bill – ek lyk 'orriebaal."

"Vir dié van julle wie se klere bietjie te groot is, ek het kleineres hier," sê Moody en wys na die eerste sak, "en omgekeerd. Moenie die bril vergeet nie. Daar's ses in die sysak. En wanneer julle klaar aangetrek het, is daar tasse in die ander sak."

Die regte Harry dink dit is heel moontlik die mees bisarre ding wat hy nog ooit gesien het – en hy het al 'n paar uiters eienaardige dinge gesien. Hy kyk hoe sy ses dubbelgangers in die eerste sak rondkrap, stelle klere daaruit haal, elkeen 'n bril opsit en hulle eie klere in die sak prop. Hy is lus om te vra hulle moet 'n bietjie meer respek vir sy privaatheid betoon wanneer hulle almal ongeërg begin uittrek, duidelik baie gemakliker daarmee om sy lyf ten toon te stel as wat hulle sou gewees het as dit hulle s'n was.

"Ek het geweet Ginny lieg oor daai tatoeëermerk," sê Ron wat na sy kaal borskas afkyk.

"Harry, jou oë is regtig baie sleg," sê Hermione terwyl sy 'n bril opsit.

Toe hulle aangetrek is, haal die vals Harrys rugsakke en uilhokke, elkeen met 'n opgestopte sneeu-uil daarin, uit die tweede sak.

"Reg," sê Moody toe daar uiteindelik sewe geklede, bebrilde en bagasie-belaaide Harrys voor hom staan. "Die pare gaan soos volg wees: Mundungus reis saam met my, per besem –"

"Hoekom is ek by jou?" knor die Harry naaste aan die agterdeur.

"Omdat jy die een is wat dopgehou moet word," brom Moody en inderdaad, sy getoorde oog wyk nie van Mundungus nie terwyl hy voortgaan: "Arthur en Fred –"

"Ek's George," sê die een van die tweeling na wie Moody wys. "Ken jy ons nie eens uitmekaar as ons Harry is nie?"

"Jammer, George –"

"Ek trek maar net jou been; ek is eintlik Fred –"

"Genoeg van die gekskeerdery!" snou Moody. "Die ander een – George of Fred of wie jy ook al is – jy gaan saam met Remus. Juffrou Delacour –"

"Ek vat Fleur op 'n Testral," sê Bill. "Sy's nie so erg oor besems nie."

Fleur kom staan langs Bill en gee hom 'n soetsappige, slaafse kyk

wat Harry met sy hele hart hoop nooit weer op sy gesig sal verskyn nie.

"Juffrou Granger saam met Kingsley, weer eens per Testral –"

Hermione lyk gerusgestel toe sy Kingsley se glimlag beantwoord. Harry weet Hermione het ook nie baie selfvertroue op 'n besemstok nie. .

"Dan bly net ek en jy oor, Ron!" sê Tonks vrolik en stamp 'n kelkie om soos sy vir hom waai.

Ron lyk nie heeltemal so ingenome soos Hermione nie.

"En jy's by my, Harry, orraait?" sê Hagrid wat effens angstig lyk. "Ons sal op die motorfiets wees, want jy sien, besems en Testralle kan nie my gewig dra nie. Maar daar's nie baie plek op die sitplek met my daarop nie, so jy sal in die syspan moet sit."

"Dis doodreg," sê Harry, nie heeltemal eerlik nie.

"Ons dink die Doodseters sal jou op 'n besem verwag," sê Moody, wat skynbaar raai hoe Harry voel. "Snape het oorgenoeg tyd gehad om vir hulle alles van jou te vertel wat hy nog nie vroeër genoem het nie, so as ons ons wel in Doodseters vasloop, reken ons hulle sal een van die Potters kies wat tuis lyk op 'n besemstok. Nou goed dan," gaan hy verder terwyl hy die sak met die vals Potters se klere in toeknoop en dan eerste terug deur toe beweeg, "volgens my is daar nog drie minute oor voor ons veronderstel is om te vertrek. Help nie ons sluit die agterdeur nie; dit sal die Doodseters nie verhoed om in te kom as hulle hier kom soek nie . . . Komaan . . ."

Harry hardloop om sy rugsak, Vuurslag en Hedwig se hok in die voorportaal te kry voor hy by die ander in die donker agtertuin aansluit. Van alle kante spring besemstokke na hande toe op; Kingsley het Hermione alreeds op 'n groot swart Testral help klim, en Bill vir Fleur op die ander een. Hagrid staan gereed langs die motorfiets met sy skermbril op.

"Is dit hy? Is dit Sirius se motorfiets?"

"Einste," sê Hagrid en kyk stralend af na Harry. "En toe jy laas op hom was, Harry, het jy in my een hand gepas!"

Harry kan nie help om effens klein te voel terwyl hy in die syspan klim nie: dit plaas hom 'n hele entjie laer as al die ander. Ron gee 'n gemaakte laggie as hy sy vriend daar sien sit soos 'n kind in 'n stampkarretjie. Harry druk sy rugsak en besemstok onder by sy voete in en knyp Hedwig se hok tussen sy knieë vas. Dit is geweldig ongemaklik.

"Arthur het bietjie hiermee gepeuter," sê Hagrid, salig onbewus van Harry se ongemak. Hy gaan sit wydsbeen op die motorfiets wat effens kraak en 'n ent in die grond wegsak. "Hy't nou 'n paar truuks in sy handvatsels. Daai een was my idee."

Hy wys met 'n dik vinger na 'n pers knoppie naby die spoedmeter.

"Wees asseblief versigtig, Hagrid," sê meneer Weasley wat langs hulle staan en sy besemstok vashou. "Ek is nie seker of dit raadsaam was nie en dit mag beslis net in noodgevalle gebruik word."

"Nou goed dan," sê Moody. "Almal gereed, asseblief; ek wil hê ons moet almal op presies dieselfde tyd vertrek of anders dien die hele skynvertrek geen doel nie."

Almal klim op hulle besems.

"Hou nou styf vas, Ron," sê Tonks en Harry sien hoe Ron skuldig onderlangs na Lupin loer voor hy sy hande aan weerskante van haar middel sit. Hagrid skop die motorfiets aan die gang; dit brul soos 'n leeu en die syspan begin vibreer.

"Sterkte, almal!" roep Moody. "Sien julle almal oor omtrent 'n halfuur by Die Konynenes. Ek tel tot by drie. Een . . . twee . . . DRIE!"

Die motorfiets gee 'n harde brul en Harry voel die syspan gevaarlik ruk; hy styg vinnig in die lug op, sy oë water effens en sy hare waai weg uit sy gesig. Rondom hom vlieg besemstokke ook boontoe, 'n Testral se lang swart stert piets verby. Sy bene, wat deur Hedwig se hok en sy rugsak in die syspan vasgedruk word, is alreeds seer en begin verdoof. Hy sit so ongemaklik dat hy amper vergeet om vir oulaas na Ligusterlaan te kyk; teen die tyd dat hy oor die kant van die syspan loer, kan hy nie meer uitmaak watter huis dit is nie. Hoër en hoër styg hulle die lug in –

En toe, uit die niet, van nêrens af nie, is hulle omring. Ten minste dertig figure in kapmantels hang tussen hemel en aarde en vorm 'n wye kring waarbinne die Orde se lede opgestyg het, onbewus van hulle –

Krete, 'n groen ligvlam aan elke kant: Hagrid gee 'n gil en die motorfiets rol om. Harry weet nie meer waar hulle is nie: straatligte bokant hom, gille om hom, en hy klou vir al wat hy werd is aan die syspan vas. Hedwig se hok, die Vuurslag en sy rugsak glip onder sy knieë uit –

"Nee – HEDWIG!"

Die besemstok tol af aarde toe, maar hy slaag daarin om sy rugsak se strop en die bokant van die hok te gryp soos die motorfiets weer regop kom. 'n Oomblik van verligting en dan nog 'n skielike groen lig. Die uil krys en val op die hok se vloer neer.

"Nee – NEE!"

Die motorfiets zoem vorentoe; Harry sien kap bedekte Doodsetters uitmekaar spat soos Hagrid deur hulle sirkel bars.

"Hedwig – *Hedwig* –"

Maar die uil lê beweginloos en pateties soos 'n speelding op haar hok se vloer. Harry kan dit nie nou inneem nie; sy angs oor die ander is allesoorheersend. Hy loer oor sy skouer en sien 'n massa mense beweeg, groen ligstrale, twee pare mense op besemstokke wat die verte in skiet, maar hy kan nie uitmaak wie hulle is nie –

"Hagrid, ons moet teruggaan, ons moet teruggaan!" gil hy bo die donderende gebrul van die enjin, pluk sy towerstaf uit en druk Hedwig se hok op die vloer vas, nog steeds nie bereid om te glo sy is dood nie. "Hagrid, DRAAI OM!"

"Dis my werk om jou veilig daar te kry, Harry!" bulder Hagrid en gee vet.

"Stop – STOP!" skree Harry. Maar toe hy weer terugkyk, vlieg twee groen ligstrale verby sy linkeroor: vier Doodseters het uit die sirkel weggebreek en sit hulle nou agterna terwyl hulle na Hagrid se breë rug mik. Hagrid swenk, maar die Doodsters hou by die motorfiets; nóg vloeke word agter hulle aan afgevuur en Harry moet diep in die syspan wegsak om hulle te vermy. Dan swaai hy om en skree: *"Bedwelm!"* 'n Rooi ligstraal skiet uit sy towerstaf en klief 'n gaping tussen die vier Doodseters deur soos hulle uitmekaar spat om dit te vermy.

"Hou vas, Harry, ek sal hulle 'n les leer!" brul Hagrid en Harry kyk net betyds op om te sien hoe druk Hagrid se vet vinger die groen knoppie naby die brandstofmeter in.

'n Muur, 'n soliede baksteenmuur, bars by die uitlaatpyp uit. Harry rek sy nek en sien hoe dit in die lug uitsit. Drie van die Doodseters swaai uit en ry dit mis, maar die vierde een is nie so gelukkig nie; hy verdwyn en val dan soos 'n klip agter die muur af, sy besemstok in stukkies gebreek. Een van sy maats ry stadiger om hom te help, maar hulle en die muur in die lug word deur die donker ingesluk toe Hagrid laag oor die handvatsels leun en versnel.

Nog Moordvloeke uit die twee oorblywende Doodseters se towerstawwe vlieg verby Harry se kop; hulle mik na Hagrid. Harry reageer met verdere Bedwelmspreuke: rooi en groen bots in die lug in 'n stortreën van veelkleurige vonke, en Harry dink wild aan vuurwerke en die Moggels daaronder wat nie 'n benul sal hê van wat aan die gang is nie –

"Hier gaan ons weer, Harry, hou vas!" gil Hagrid en sy vinger druk op 'n tweede knoppie. Hierdie keer borrel daar 'n groot net by die motorfiets se uitlaatpyp uit, maar die Doodseters is gereed daarvoor. Hulle swenk nie net om dit te mis nie, maar die een wat stadiger gery het om hulle bewustelose vriend te red, haal hulle nou in;

hy doem skielik uit die donker op en nou is daar drie van hulle wat die motorfiets agternasit terwyl hulle vloeke daarop afvuur.

"Hierdie een sal die ding doen, Harry, hou styf vas!" skree Hagrid en Harry sien hoe hy met sy hele hand op die pers knoppie langs die spoedmeter druk.

Met 'n onmiskenbare bulderende gebrul bars drakevuur by die uitlaatpyp uit, witwarm en blou, en die motorfiets skiet soos 'n koeël vorentoe met 'n geluid van knarsende metaal. Harry sien die Doodseters wegswenk om die dodelike vlamspoor te ontwyk, en terselfdertyd voel hy die syspan gevaarlik slinger; die metaal wat dit met die motorfiets verbind, het versplinter as gevolg van die vinnige versnelling.

"'s orraait, Harry!" brul Hagrid wat nou plat op sy rug gegooi word deur die spoedversnelling; niemand bestuur nou nie en die syspan begin woes in die motorfiets se suigstroom rondruk.

"Ek sal hulle wys, Harry, moenie worrie nie!" gil Hagrid en pluk sy pienk blommetjiesambreel uit sy baadjiesak.

"Hagrid! Nee! Laat ek!"

"REPARO!"

Daar is 'n oorverdowende slag en die syspan breek heeltemal weg van die motorfiets af: Harry skiet vorentoe, aangedryf deur die stukrag van die motorfiets se vliegtog, en dan begin die syspan hoogte verloor –

Harry rig sy towerstaf desperaat op die syspan en skree: "*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

Die syspan styg op soos 'n kurkprop, onstuurbaar, maar ten minste nog steeds in die lug. Die verligting duur egter net 'n oomblik lank, want nóg vloeke flits verby hom: die drie Doodseters kom al hoe nader.

"Ek kom, Harry!" gil Hagrid vanuit die donker, maar Harry kan voel die syspan begin weer afsak. Hy buk so laag as wat hy kan, mik na die middel van die aankomende figure en gil: "*Impedimenta!*"

Die paljas tref die middelste Doodseter op die borskas: die man is vir 'n oomblik absurd in die lug oopgespalk asof hy 'n onsigbare versperring getref het; een van sy maats bots amper teen hom –

Dan begin die syspan in alle erns val en die oorblywende Doodseter vuur 'n vloek af wat so naby aan Harry verbyvlieg dat hy onder die syspan se rand moet induik en 'n tand op die kant van sy sitplek uitstamp –

"Ek kom, Harry, ek kom!"

'n Reusehand gryp die agterkant van Harry se kleed en hys hom uit die syspan wat neerstort; Harry trek sy rugsak saam, trek hom-

self tot op die motorfiets se sitplek en sit nou rug aan rug met Hagrid. Terwyl hulle boontoe styg, weg van die twee oorblywende Doodseters af, spoeg Harry bloed uit sy mond, rig sy towerstaf op die vallende syspan en gil: "*Confringo!*"

Hy ervaar 'n gevoel van verskriklike, verpletterende smart oor Hedwig wanneer dit ontplof; die Doodseter naaste daaraan word van sy besem afgeskiet en uit die oog verloor; sy maat val terug en verdwyn.

"Harry, ek's jammer, ek's jammer," kerm Hagrid. "Ek moes dit nie self probeer regmaak het nie – jy't nie genoeg plek –"

"Dis nie 'n probleem nie; hou net aan vlieg!" skree Harry terug toe nog twee Doodseters uit die donker verskyn en nader kom.

Terwyl die vloeke weer op hulle begin reën, swenk Hagrid en jaag slingerend: Harry weet Hagrid kan dit nie waag om die draakvuurknoppie weer te druk nie, want Harry sit te onveilig. Harry vuur Bedwelmspreuk na Bedwelmspreuk af wat hulle agtervolgers beswaarlik weghou. Hy skiet nog 'n blokkeerpaljas na hulle toe: die naaste Doodseter swenk om dit te vermy; sy mantelkap glip af en in die volgende Bedwelmspreuk se rooi lig sien Harry die vreemde, uitdrukkinglose gesig van Stanley Shunpike – Stan –

"*Expelliarmus!*" gil Harry.

"Dis hy, dis hy; dis die regte een!"

Die Doodseter met die kap aan se uitroep bereik Harry selfs bo die gedonder van die motorfiets se enjin. Die volgende oomblik val albei agtervolgers terug en verdwyn.

"Harry, wat het gebeur?" brul Hagrid. "Waarnatoe is hulle?"

"Ek weet nie!"

Maar Harry is bang; die Doodseter met die kap het geskree: "Dis die regte een!" Hoe weet hy dit? Harry kyk om na die skynbaar leë duisternis en voel hoe dit hom bedreig. Waar is hulle?

Hy draai om op die sitplek sodat hy vorentoe kan kyk en gryp die agterkant van Hagrid se baadjie vas.

"Hagrid, doen weer die draakvuurding. Ons moet hier wegkom!"

"Hou dan styf vas, Harry!"

Daar is weer 'n oorverdowende, krysende gebrul en die witblou vuur skiet by die uitlaatpyp uit. Harry voel hoe hy agtertoe van die stukkie sitplek wat hy het, afgly, want Hagrid is agteroor op hom neergeslinger en kan skaars sy greep op die handvatsels behou –

"Ek dink ons het hulle afgeskud, Harry, ek dink ons het dit reggekry!" gil Hagrid.

Maar Harry is nie so seker nie: vrees pak hom beet terwyl hy

links en regs kyk op soek na sy agtervolgers wat hy seker is gaan kom . . . Hoekom het hulle teruggeval? Een van hulle het nog 'n towerstaf . . . *Dis hy, dis die regte een* . . . Hulle het dit gesê net nadat hy Stan probeer Ontwapen het . . .

"Ons is amper daar, Harry, ons het dit amper gemaak!" roep Hagrid.

Harry voel hoe die motorfiets effens hoogte verloor, hoewel die ligte onder op die grond nog so ver soos sterre lyk.

Dan brand die litteken op sy voorkop soos vuur: terwyl 'n Doodseter aan weerskante van die motorfiets verskyn, mis twee Moordvloeke wat van agter afgevuur word Harry met millimeters –

En dan sien Harry hom. Voldemort vlieg soos rook op die wind, sonder 'n besemstok of Testral om aan vas te hou; sy slangagtige gesig glinster uit die duisternis, sy wit vingers lig sy towerstaf weer –

Hagrid brul van vrees en stuur die motorfiets in 'n vertikale duikvlug. Terwyl hy met alle mag vashou, vuur Harry na willekeur Bedwelmspreuk in die kolkende nag af. Hy sien 'n liggaam verby hom vlieg en weet hy het een van hulle getref, maar dan hoor hy 'n slag en sien vonke uit die enjin kom; die motorfiets spiraal deur die lug, heeltemal buite beheer –

Groen ligstrale skiet weer verby hulle. Harry het nie 'n benul watter kant is bo en watter kant onder nie. Sy litteken brand nog steeds; hy is seker hy gaan nou enige oomblik doodgaan. 'n Figuur met 'n kap op 'n besemstok is 'n paar voet van hom af; hy sien hoe die een sy arm lig –

"NEE!"

Hagrid werp hom met 'n woedende uitroep van die motorfiets af op die Doodseter; Harry sien tot sy afgryse hoe hy sowel Hagrid as die Doodseter uit die oog verloor; hulle gekombineerde gewig is te veel vir die besemstok –

Terwyl hy sukkel om die vallende motorfiets met sy knieë vas te knyp, hoor Harry Voldemort skree: "*Myne!*"

Dit is verby: hy kan nie sien of hoor waar Voldemort is nie; hy sien skrams hoe 'n ander Doodseter uit die pad wegswenk en hoor: "*Avada –*"

Terwyl die pyn in Harry se litteken sy oë toedwing, werk sy towerstaf vanself. Hy voel hoe dit sy hand soos 'n groot magneet rondsleep, sien 'n straal goue vuur deur sy halftoe ooglede, hoor 'n *kraak* en 'n woedende uitroep. Die oorblywende Doodseter gil; Voldemort skree: "*Nee!*" Op die een of ander manier is Harry se neus nou byna op die draakvuurknoppie: hy kap met sy los hand daarop;

die motorfiets spoeg meer vlamme die lug in en jaag reguit af grond toe.

"Hagrid!" roep Harry en hou krampagtig aan die motorfiets vas. "Hagrid – *accio Hagrid!*"

Die motorfiets tel spoed op soos dit terug aarde toe gesuig word. Harry se gesig is op dieselfde vlak as die handvatsels; hy kan niks sien behalwe veraf liggies wat nader en nader kom nie: hy gaan neerstort en daar is niks wat hy daaraan kan doen nie. Agter hom kom daar nog 'n uitroep –

"Jou towerstaf, Selwyn, gee vir my jou towerstaf!"

Hy voel Voldemort voor hy hom sien. Hy kyk sywaarts en staar vas in die rooi oë; hy is seker dit is die laaste ding wat hy ooit gaan sien: Voldemort wat regmaak om weer 'n vloek oor hom uit te spreek –

En dan verdwyn Voldemort. Harry kyk af en sien Hagrid oopgevlek op die grond onder hom; hy pluk hard aan die handvatsels om te keer dat hy hom tref, gryp na die rem, en beland met 'n oorverdowende slag wat die grond laat bewe in 'n modderpoel.

CHAPTER FIVE



FALLEN WARRIOR

"Hagrid?"

Harry struggled to raise himself out of the debris of metal and leather that surrounded him; his hands sank into inches of muddy water as he tried to stand. He could not understand where Voldemort had gone and expected him to swoop out of the darkness at any moment. Something hot and wet was trickling down his chin and from his forehead. He crawled out of the pond and stumbled toward the great dark mass on the ground that was Hagrid.

"Hagrid? Hagrid, talk to me —"

But the dark mass did not stir.

"Who's there? Is it Potter? Are you Harry Potter?"

Harry did not recognize the man's voice. Then a woman shouted, "They've crashed, Ted! Crashed in the garden!"

Harry's head was swimming.

"Hagrid," he repeated stupidly, and his knees buckled.

The next thing he knew, he was lying on his back on what felt like cushions, with a burning sensation in his ribs and right arm. His missing tooth had been regrown. The scar on his forehead was still throbbing.

"Hagrid?"

He opened his eyes and saw that he was lying on a sofa in an unfamiliar, lamplit sitting room. His rucksack lay on the floor a short distance away, wet and muddy. A fair-haired, big-bellied man was watching Harry anxiously.

"Hagrid's fine, son," said the man, "the wife's seeing to him now. How are you feeling? Anything else broken? I've fixed your ribs, your tooth, and your arm. I'm Ted, by the way, Ted Tonks — Dora's father."

Harry sat up too quickly: Lights popped in front of his eyes and he felt sick and giddy.

"Voldemort —"

"Easy, now," said Ted Tonks, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder and pushing him back against the cushions. "That was a nasty crash you just had. What happened, anyway? Something go wrong with the bike? Arthur Weasley overstretch himself again, him and his Muggle contraptions?"

"No," said Harry, as his scar pulsed like an open wound. "Death Eaters, loads of them — we were chased —"

"Death Eaters?" said Ted sharply. "What d'you mean, Death Eaters? I thought they didn't know you were being moved tonight, I thought —"

"They knew," said Harry.

Ted Tonks looked up at the ceiling as though he could see through it to the sky above.

"Well, we know our protective charms hold, then, don't we? They shouldn't be able to get within a hundred yards of the place in any direction."

Now Harry understood why Voldemort had vanished; it had been at the point when the motorbike crossed the barrier of the Order's charms. He only hoped they would continue to work: He imagined Voldemort, a hundred yards above them as they spoke, looking for a way to penetrate what Harry visualized as a great transparent bubble.

He swung his legs off the sofa; he needed to see Hagrid with his own eyes before he would believe that he was alive. He had barely stood up, however, when a door opened and Hagrid squeezed through it, his face covered in mud and blood, limping a little but miraculously alive.

"Harry!"

Knocking over two delicate tables and an aspidistra, he covered the floor between them in two strides and pulled Harry into a hug that nearly cracked his newly repaired ribs. "Blimey, Harry, how did yeh get out o' that? I thought we were both goners."

"Yeah, me too. I can't believe —"

Harry broke off. He had just noticed the woman who had entered the room behind Hagrid.

"You!" he shouted, and he thrust his hand into his pocket, but it was empty.

"Your wand's here, son," said Ted, tapping it on Harry's arm. "It fell right beside you, I picked it up. And that's my wife you're shouting at."

"Oh, I'm — I'm sorry."

As she moved forward into the room, Mrs. Tonks's resemblance to her sister Bellatrix became much less pronounced: Her hair was a light, soft brown and her eyes were wider and kinder. Nevertheless, she looked a little haughty after Harry's exclamation.

"What happened to our daughter?" she asked. "Hagrid said you were ambushed; where is Nymphadora?"

"I don't know," said Harry. "We don't know what happened to anyone else."

She and Ted exchanged looks. A mixture of fear and guilt gripped Harry at the sight of their expressions; if any of the others had died, it was his fault, all his fault. He had consented to the plan, given them his hair. . . .

"The Portkey," he said, remembering all of a sudden. "We've got to get back to the Burrow and find out — then we'll be able to send you word, or — or Tonks will, once she's —"

"Dora'll be okay, 'Dromeda," said Ted. "She knows her stuff, she's been in plenty of tight spots with the Aurors. The Portkey's through here," he added to Harry. "It's supposed to leave in three minutes, if you want to take it."

"Yeah, we do," said Harry. He seized his rucksack, swung it onto his shoulders. "I —"

He looked at Mrs. Tonks, wanting to apologize for the state of fear in which he left her and for which he felt so terribly responsible, but no words occurred to him that did not seem hollow and insincere.

"I'll tell Tonks — Dora — to send word, when she . . . Thanks for patching us up, thanks for everything. I —"

He was glad to leave the room and follow Ted Tonks along a short hallway and into a bedroom. Hagrid came after them, bending low to avoid hitting his head on the door lintel.

"There you go, son. That's the Portkey."

Mr. Tonks was pointing to a small, silver-backed hairbrush lying on the dressing table.

"Thanks," said Harry, reaching out to place a finger on it, ready to leave.

"Wait a moment," said Hagrid, looking around. "Harry, where's Hedwig?"

"She . . . she got hit," said Harry.

The realization crashed over him: He felt ashamed of himself as the tears stung his eyes. The owl had been his companion, his one great link with the magical world whenever he had been forced to return to the Dursleys.

Hagrid reached out a great hand and patted him painfully on the shoulder.

"Never mind," he said gruffly. "Never mind. She had a great old life —"

"Hagrid!" said Ted Tonks warningly, as the hairbrush glowed bright blue, and Hagrid only just got his forefinger to it in time.

With a jerk behind the navel as though an invisible hook and line

had dragged him forward, Harry was pulled into nothingness, spinning uncontrollably, his finger glued to the Portkey as he and Hagrid hurtled away from Mr. Tonks. Seconds later Harry's feet slammed onto hard ground and he fell onto his hands and knees in the yard of the Burrow. He heard screams. Throwing aside the no longer glowing hairbrush, Harry stood up, swaying slightly, and saw Mrs. Weasley and Ginny running down the steps by the back door as Hagrid, who had also collapsed on landing, clambered laboriously to his feet.

"Harry? You are the real Harry? What happened? Where are the others?" cried Mrs. Weasley.

"What d'you mean? Isn't anyone else back?" Harry panted.

The answer was clearly etched in Mrs. Weasley's pale face.

"The Death Eaters were waiting for us," Harry told her. "We were surrounded the moment we took off — they knew it was tonight — I don't know what happened to anyone else, four of them chased us, it was all we could do to get away, and then Voldemort caught up with us —"

He could hear the self-justifying note in his voice, the plea for her to understand why he did not know what had happened to her sons, but —

"Thank goodness you're all right," she said, pulling him into a hug he did not feel he deserved.

"Haven't go' any brandy, have yeh, Molly?" asked Hagrid a little shakily. "Fer medicinal purposes?"

She could have summoned it by magic, but as she hurried back toward the crooked house, Harry knew that she wanted to hide her

face. He turned to Ginny and she answered his unspoken plea for information at once.

“Ron and Tonks should have been back first, but they missed their Portkey, it came back without them,” she said, pointing at a rusty oil can lying on the ground nearby. “And that one,” she pointed at an ancient sneaker, “should have been Dad and Fred’s, they were supposed to be second. You and Hagrid were third and,” she checked her watch, “if they made it, George and Lupin ought to be back in about a minute.”

Mrs. Weasley reappeared carrying a bottle of brandy, which she handed to Hagrid. He uncorked it and drank it straight down in one.

“Mum!” shouted Ginny, pointing to a spot several feet away.

A blue light had appeared in the darkness: It grew larger and brighter, and Lupin and George appeared, spinning and then falling. Harry knew immediately that there was something wrong: Lupin was supporting George, who was unconscious and whose face was covered in blood.

Harry ran forward and seized George’s legs. Together, he and Lupin carried George into the house and through the kitchen to the sitting room, where they laid him on the sofa. As the lamplight fell across George’s head, Ginny gasped and Harry’s stomach lurched: One of George’s ears was missing. The side of his head and neck were drenched in wet, shockingly scarlet blood.

No sooner had Mrs. Weasley bent over her son than Lupin grabbed Harry by the upper arm and dragged him, none too gently, back into the kitchen, where Hagrid was still attempting to ease his bulk through the back door.

"Oi!" said Hagrid indignantly. "Le' go of him! Le' go of Harry!"

Lupin ignored him.

"What creature sat in the corner the first time that Harry Potter visited my office at Hogwarts?" he said, giving Harry a small shake. "Answer me!"

"A — a grindylow in a tank, wasn't it?"

Lupin released Harry and fell back against a kitchen cupboard.

"Wha' was tha' about?" roared Hagrid.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I had to check," said Lupin tersely. "We've been betrayed. Voldemort knew that you were being moved tonight and the only people who could have told him were directly involved in the plan. You might have been an impostor."

"So why aren' you checkin' me?" panted Hagrid, still struggling to fit through the door.

"You're half-giant," said Lupin, looking up at Hagrid. "The Polyjuice Potion is designed for human use only."

"None of the Order would have told Voldemort we were moving tonight," said Harry. The idea was dreadful to him, he could not believe it of any of them. "Voldemort only caught up with me toward the end, he didn't know which one I was in the beginning. If he'd been in on the plan he'd have known from the start I was the one with Hagrid."

"Voldemort caught up with you?" said Lupin sharply. "What happened? How did you escape?"

Harry explained briefly how the Death Eaters pursuing them had seemed to recognize him as the true Harry, how they had abandoned the chase, how they must have summoned Voldemort, who had

appeared just before he and Hagrid had reached the sanctuary of Tonks's parents.

"They recognized you? But how? What had you done?"

"I . . ." Harry tried to remember; the whole journey seemed like a blur of panic and confusion. "I saw Stan Shunpike. . . . You know, the bloke who was the conductor on the Knight Bus? And I tried to Disarm him instead of — well, he doesn't know what he's doing, does he? He must be Imperiused!"

Lupin looked aghast.

"Harry, the time for Disarming is past! These people are trying to capture and kill you! At least Stun if you aren't prepared to kill!"

"We were hundreds of feet up! Stan's not himself, and if I Stunned him and he'd fallen, he'd have died the same as if I'd used Avada Kedavra! Expelliarmus saved me from Voldemort two years ago," Harry added defiantly. Lupin was reminding him of the sneering Hufflepuff Zacharias Smith, who had jeered at Harry for wanting to teach Dumbledore's Army how to Disarm.

"Yes, Harry," said Lupin with painful restraint, "and a great number of Death Eaters witnessed that happening! Forgive me, but it was a very unusual move then, under imminent threat of death. Repeating it tonight in front of Death Eaters who either witnessed or heard about the first occasion was close to suicidal!"

"So you think I should have killed Stan Shunpike?" said Harry angrily.

"Of course not," said Lupin, "but the Death Eaters — frankly, most people! — would have expected you to attack back! Expelliarmus is a useful spell, Harry, but the Death Eaters seem to think it is your

signature move, and I urge you not to let it become so!"

Lupin was making Harry feel idiotic, and yet there was still a grain of defiance inside him.

"I won't blast people out of my way just because they're there," said Harry. "That's Voldemort's job."

Lupin's retort was lost: Finally succeeding in squeezing through the door, Hagrid staggered to a chair and sat down; it collapsed beneath him. Ignoring his mingled oaths and apologies, Harry addressed Lupin again.

"Will George be okay?"

All Lupin's frustration with Harry seemed to drain away at the question.

"I think so, although there's no chance of replacing his ear, not when it's been cursed off —"

There was a scuffling from outside. Lupin dived for the back door; Harry leapt over Hagrid's legs and sprinted into the yard.

Two figures had appeared in the yard, and as Harry ran toward them he realized they were Hermione, now returning to her normal appearance, and Kingsley, both clutching a bent coat hanger. Hermione flung herself into Harry's arms, but Kingsley showed no pleasure at the sight of any of them. Over Hermione's shoulder Harry saw him raise his wand and point it at Lupin's chest.

"The last words Albus Dumbledore spoke to the pair of us?"

"'Harry is the best hope we have. Trust him,'" said Lupin calmly.

Kingsley turned his wand on Harry, but Lupin said, "It's him, I've checked!"

"All right, all right!" said Kingsley, stowing his wand back

beneath his cloak. "But somebody betrayed us! They knew, they knew it was tonight!"

"So it seems," replied Lupin, "but apparently they did not realize that there would be seven Harrys."

"Small comfort!" snarled Kingsley. "Who else is back?"

"Only Harry, Hagrid, George, and me."

Hermione stifled a little moan behind her hand.

"What happened to you?" Lupin asked Kingsley.

"Followed by five, injured two, might've killed one," Kingsley reeled off, "and we saw You-Know-Who as well, he joined the chase halfway through but vanished pretty quickly. Remus, he can —"

"Fly," supplied Harry. "I saw him too, he came after Hagrid and me."

"So that's why he left, to follow you!" said Kingsley. "I couldn't understand why he'd vanished. But what made him change targets?"

"Harry behaved a little too kindly to Stan Shunpike," said Lupin.

"Stan?" repeated Hermione. "But I thought he was in Azkaban?"

Kingsley let out a mirthless laugh.

"Hermione, there's obviously been a mass breakout which the Ministry has hushed up. Travers's hood fell off when I cursed him, he's supposed to be inside too. But what happened to you, Remus? Where's George?"

"He lost an ear," said Lupin.

"Lost an — ?" repeated Hermione in a high voice.

"Snape's work," said Lupin.

"Snape?" shouted Harry. "You didn't say —"

"He lost his hood during the chase. Sectumsempra was always a speciality of Snape's. I wish I could say I'd paid him back in kind, but it was all I could do to keep George on the broom after he was injured, he was losing so much blood."

Silence fell between the four of them as they looked up at the sky. There was no sign of movement; the stars stared back, unblinking, indifferent, unobscured by flying friends. Where was Ron? Where were Fred and Mr. Weasley? Where were Bill, Fleur, Tonks, Mad-Eye, and Mundungus?

"Harry, give us a hand!" called Hagrid hoarsely from the door, in which he was stuck again. Glad of something to do, Harry pulled him free, then headed through the empty kitchen and back into the sitting room, where Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were still tending to George. Mrs. Weasley had staunched his bleeding now, and by the lamplight Harry saw a clean, gaping hole where George's ear had been.

"How is he?"

Mrs. Weasley looked around and said, "I can't make it grow back, not when it's been removed by Dark Magic. But it could have been so much worse. . . . He's alive."

"Yeah," said Harry. "Thank God."

"Did I hear someone else in the yard?" Ginny asked.

"Hermione and Kingsley," said Harry.

"Thank goodness," Ginny whispered. They looked at each other; Harry wanted to hug her, hold on to her; he did not even care much that Mrs. Weasley was there, but before he could act on the impulse there was a great crash from the kitchen.

"I'll prove who I am, Kingsley, after I've seen my son, now back

off if you know what's good for you!"

Harry had never heard Mr. Weasley shout like that before. He burst into the living room, his bald patch gleaming with sweat, his spectacles askew, Fred right behind him, both pale but uninjured.

"Arthur!" sobbed Mrs. Weasley. "Oh thank goodness!"

"How is he?"

Mr. Weasley dropped to his knees beside George. For the first time since Harry had known him, Fred seemed to be lost for words. He gaped over the back of the sofa at his twin's wound as if he could not believe what he was seeing.

Perhaps roused by the sound of Fred and their father's arrival, George stirred.

"How do you feel, Georgie?" whispered Mrs. Weasley.

George's fingers groped for the side of his head.

"Saintlike," he murmured.

"What's wrong with him?" croaked Fred, looking terrified. "Is his mind affected?"

"Saintlike," repeated George, opening his eyes and looking up at his brother. "You see . . . I'm holy. *Holey,* Fred, geddit?"

Mrs. Weasley sobbed harder than ever. Color flooded Fred's pale face.

"Pathetic," he told George. "Pathetic! With the whole wide world of ear-related humor before you, you go for *holey*?"

"Ah well," said George, grinning at his tear-soaked mother. "You'll be able to tell us apart now, anyway, Mum."

He looked around.

"Hi, Harry — you are Harry, right?"

"Yeah, I am," said Harry, moving closer to the sofa.

"Well, at least we got you back okay," said George. "Why aren't Ron and Bill huddled round my sickbed?"

"They're not back yet, George," said Mrs. Weasley. George's grin faded. Harry glanced at Ginny and motioned to her to accompany him back outside. As they walked through the kitchen she said in a low voice,

"Ron and Tonks should be back by now. They didn't have a long journey; Auntie Muriel's not that far from here."

Harry said nothing. He had been trying to keep fear at bay ever since reaching the Burrow, but now it enveloped him, seeming to crawl over his skin, throbbing in his chest, clogging his throat. As they walked down the back steps into the dark yard, Ginny took his hand.

Kingsley was striding backward and forward, glancing up at the sky every time he turned. Harry was reminded of Uncle Vernon pacing the living room a million years ago. Hagrid, Hermione, and Lupin stood shoulder to shoulder, gazing upward in silence. None of them looked around when Harry and Ginny joined their silent vigil.

The minutes stretched into what might as well have been years. The slightest breath of wind made them all jump and turn toward the whispering bush or tree in the hope that one of the missing Order members might leap unscathed from its leaves —

And then a broom materialized directly above them and streaked toward the ground —

"It's them!" screamed Hermione.

Tonks landed in a long skid that sent earth and pebbles everywhere.

"Remus!" Tonks cried as she staggered off the broom into Lupin's arms. His face was set and white: He seemed unable to speak. Ron tripped dazedly toward Harry and Hermione.

"You're okay," he mumbled, before Hermione flew at him and hugged him tightly.

"I thought — I thought —"

"'M all right," said Ron, patting her on the back. "'M fine."

"Ron was great," said Tonks warmly, relinquishing her hold on Lupin. "Wonderful. Stunned one of the Death Eaters, straight to the head, and when you're aiming at a moving target from a flying broom —"

"You did?" said Hermione, gazing up at Ron with her arms still around his neck.

"Always the tone of surprise," he said a little grumpily, breaking free. "Are we the last back?"

"No," said Ginny, "we're still waiting for Bill and Fleur and Mad-Eye and Mundungus. I'm going to tell Mum and Dad you're okay, Ron —"

She ran back inside.

"So what kept you? What happened?" Lupin sounded almost angry at Tonks.

"Bellatrix," said Tonks. "She wants me quite as much as she wants Harry, Remus, she tried very hard to kill me. I just wish I'd got her, I owe Bellatrix. But we definitely injured Rodolphus. . . . Then we got to Ron's Auntie Muriel's and we'd missed our Portkey and she was

fussing over us —"

A muscle was jumping in Lupin's jaw. He nodded, but seemed unable to say anything else.

"So what happened to you lot?" Tonks asked, turning to Harry, Hermione, and Kingsley.

They recounted the stories of their own journeys, but all the time the continued absence of Bill, Fleur, Mad-Eye, and Mundungus seemed to lie upon them like a frost, its icy bite harder and harder to ignore.

"I'm going to have to get back to Downing Street, I should have been there an hour ago," said Kingsley finally, after a last sweeping gaze at the sky. "Let me know when they're back."

Lupin nodded. With a wave to the others, Kingsley walked away into the darkness toward the gate. Harry thought he heard the faintest *pop* as Kingsley Disapparated just beyond the Burrow's boundaries.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley came racing down the back steps, Ginny behind them. Both parents hugged Ron before turning to Lupin and Tonks.

"Thank you," said Mrs. Weasley, "for our sons."

"Don't be silly, Molly," said Tonks at once.

"How's George?" asked Lupin.

"What's wrong with him?" piped up Ron.

"He's lost —"

But the end of Mrs. Weasley's sentence was drowned in a general outcry: A thestral had just soared into sight and landed a few feet from them. Bill and Fleur slid from its back, windswept but unhurt.

"Bill! Thank God, thank God —"

Mrs. Weasley ran forward, but the hug Bill bestowed upon her was perfunctory. Looking directly at his father, he said, "Mad-Eye's dead."

Nobody spoke, nobody moved. Harry felt as though something inside him was falling, falling through the earth, leaving him forever.

"We saw it," said Bill; Fleur nodded, tear tracks glittering on her cheeks in the light from the kitchen window. "It happened just after we broke out of the circle: Mad-Eye and Dung were close by us, they were heading north too. Voldemort — he can fly — went straight for them. Dung panicked, I heard him cry out, Mad-Eye tried to stop him, but he Disapparated. Voldemort's curse hit Mad-Eye full in the face, he fell backward off his broom and — there was nothing we could do, nothing, we had half a dozen of them on our own tail —"

Bill's voice broke.

"Of course you couldn't have done anything," said Lupin.

They all stood looking at each other. Harry could not quite comprehend it. Mad-Eye dead; it could not be. . . . Mad-Eye, so tough, so brave, the consummate survivor . . .

At last it seemed to dawn on everyone, though nobody said it, that there was no point waiting in the yard anymore, and in silence they followed Mr. and Mrs. Weasley back into the Burrow, and into the living room, where Fred and George were laughing together.

"What's wrong?" said Fred, scanning their faces as they entered. "What's happened? Who's — ?"

"Mad-Eye," said Mr. Weasley. "Dead."

The twins' grins turned to grimaces of shock. Nobody seemed to know what to do. Tonks was crying silently into a handkerchief: She

had been close to Mad-Eye, Harry knew, his favorite and his protégée at the Ministry of Magic. Hagrid, who had sat down on the floor in the corner where he had most space, was dabbing at his eyes with his tablecloth-sized handkerchief.

Bill walked over to the sideboard and pulled out a bottle of firewhisky and some glasses.

"Here," he said, and with a wave of his wand he sent twelve full glasses soaring through the room to each of them, holding the thirteenth aloft. "Mad-Eye."

"Mad-Eye," they all said, and drank.

"Mad-Eye," echoed Hagrid, a little late, with a hiccup.

The firewhisky seared Harry's throat. It seemed to burn feeling back into him, dispelling the numbness and sense of unreality, firing him with something that was like courage.

"So Mundungus disappeared?" said Lupin, who had drained his own glass in one.

The atmosphere changed at once. Everybody looked tense, watching Lupin, both wanting him to go on, it seemed to Harry, and slightly afraid of what they might hear.

"I know what you're thinking," said Bill, "and I wondered that too, on the way back here, because they seemed to be expecting us, didn't they? But Mundungus can't have betrayed us. They didn't know there would be seven Harrys, that confused them the moment we appeared, and in case you've forgotten, it was Mundungus who suggested that little bit of skullduggery. Why wouldn't he have told them the essential point? I think Dung panicked, it's as simple as that. He didn't want to come in the first place, but Mad-Eye made him, and

You-Know-Who went straight for them. It was enough to make anyone panic."

"You-Know-Who acted exactly as Mad-Eye expected him to," sniffed Tonks. "Mad-Eye said he'd expect the real Harry to be with the toughest, most skilled Aurors. He chased Mad-Eye first, and when Mundungus gave them away he switched to Kingsley. . . ."

"Yes, and zat eez all very good," snapped Fleur, "but still eet does not explain 'ow zey knew we were moving 'Arry tonight, does eet? Somebody must 'ave been careless. Somebody let slip ze date to an outsider. It is ze only explanation for zem knowing ze date but not ze 'ole plan."

She glared around at them all, tear tracks still etched on her beautiful face, silently daring any of them to contradict her. Nobody did. The only sound to break the silence was that of Hagrid hiccuping from behind his handkerchief. Harry glanced at Hagrid, who had just risked his own life to save Harry's — Hagrid, whom he loved, whom he trusted, who had once been tricked into giving Voldemort crucial information in exchange for a dragon's egg. . . .

"No," Harry said aloud, and they all looked at him, surprised: The firewhisky seemed to have amplified his voice. "I mean . . . if somebody made a mistake," Harry went on, "and let something slip, I know they didn't mean to do it. It's not their fault," he repeated, again a little louder than he would usually have spoken. "We've got to trust each other. I trust all of you, I don't think anyone in this room would ever sell me to Voldemort."

More silence followed his words. They were all looking at him; Harry felt a little hot again, and drank some more firewhisky for

something to do. As he drank, he thought of Mad-Eye. Mad-Eye had always been scathing about Dumbledore's willingness to trust people.

"Well said, Harry," said Fred unexpectedly.

"Yeah, 'ear, 'ear," said George, with half a glance at Fred, the corner of whose mouth twitched.

Lupin was wearing an odd expression as he looked at Harry. It was close to pitying.

"You think I'm a fool?" demanded Harry.

"No, I think you're like James," said Lupin, "who would have regarded it as the height of dishonor to mistrust his friends."

Harry knew what Lupin was getting at: that his father had been betrayed by his friend, Peter Pettigrew. He felt irrationally angry. He wanted to argue, but Lupin had turned away from him, set down his glass upon a side table, and addressed Bill, "There's work to do. I can ask Kingsley whether —"

"No," said Bill at once, "I'll do it, I'll come."

"Where are you going?" said Tonks and Fleur together.

"Mad-Eye's body," said Lupin. "We need to recover it."

"Can't it — ?" began Mrs. Weasley with an appealing look at Bill.

"Wait?" said Bill. "Not unless you'd rather the Death Eaters took it?"

Nobody spoke. Lupin and Bill said good-bye and left.

The rest of them now dropped into chairs, all except for Harry, who remained standing. The suddenness and completeness of death was with them like a presence.

"I've got to go too," said Harry.

Ten pairs of startled eyes looked at him.

"Don't be silly, Harry," said Mrs. Weasley. "What are you talking about?"

"I can't stay here."

He rubbed his forehead; it was prickling again, it had not hurt like this for more than a year.

"You're all in danger while I'm here. I don't want —"

"But don't be so silly!" said Mrs. Weasley. "The whole point of tonight was to get you here safely, and thank goodness it worked. And Fleur's agreed to get married here rather than in France, we've arranged everything so that we can all stay together and look after you —"

She did not understand; she was making him feel worse, not better.

"If Voldemort finds out I'm here —"

"But why should he?" asked Mrs. Weasley.

"There are a dozen places you might be now, Harry," said Mr. Weasley. "He's got no way of knowing which safe house you're in."

"It's not me I'm worried for!" said Harry.

"We know that," said Mr. Weasley quietly, "but it would make our efforts tonight seem rather pointless if you left."

"Yer not goin' anywhere," growled Hagrid. "Blimey, Harry, after all we wen' through ter get you here?"

"Yeah, what about my bleeding ear?" said George, hoisting himself up on his cushions.

"I know that —"

"Mad-Eye wouldn't want —"

"I KNOW!" Harry bellowed.

He felt beleaguered and blackmailed: Did they think he did not know what they had done for him, didn't they understand that it was for precisely that reason that he wanted to go now, before they had to suffer any more on his behalf? There was a long and awkward silence in which his scar continued to prickle and throb, and which was broken at last by Mrs. Weasley.

"Where's Hedwig, Harry?" she said coaxingly. "We can put her up with Pigwidgeon and give her something to eat."

His insides clenched like a fist. He could not tell her the truth. He drank the last of his firewhisky to avoid answering.

"Wait till it gets out yeh did it again, Harry," said Hagrid. "Escaped him, fought him off when he was right on top of yeh!"

"It wasn't me," said Harry flatly. "It was my wand. My wand acted of its own accord."

After a few moments, Hermione said gently, "But that's impossible, Harry. You mean that you did magic without meaning to; you reacted instinctively."

"No," said Harry. "The bike was falling, I couldn't have told you where Voldemort was, but my wand spun in my hand and found him and shot a spell at him, and it wasn't even a spell I recognized. I've never made gold flames appear before."

"Often," said Mr. Weasley, "when you're in a pressured situation you can produce magic you never dreamed of. Small children often find, before they're trained —"

"It wasn't like that," said Harry through gritted teeth. His scar was

burning: He felt angry and frustrated; he hated the idea that they were all imagining him to have power to match Voldemort's.

No one said anything. He knew that they did not believe him. Now that he came to think of it, he had never heard of a wand performing magic on its own before.

His scar seared with pain; it was all he could do not to moan aloud. Muttering about fresh air, he set down his glass and left the room.

As he crossed the dark yard, the great skeletal thestral looked up, rustled its enormous batlike wings, then resumed its grazing. Harry stopped at the gate into the garden, staring out at its overgrown plants, rubbing his pounding forehead and thinking of Dumbledore.

Dumbledore would have believed him, he knew it. Dumbledore would have known how and why Harry's wand had acted independently, because Dumbledore always had the answers; he had known about wands, had explained to Harry the strange connection that existed between his wand and Voldemort's . . . But Dumbledore, like Mad-Eye, like Sirius, like his parents, like his poor owl, all were gone where Harry could never talk to them again. He felt a burning in his throat that had nothing to do with firewhisky. . . .

And then, out of nowhere, the pain in his scar peaked. As he clutched his forehead and closed his eyes, a voice screamed inside his head.

"You told me the problem would be solved by using another's wand!"

And into his mind burst the vision of an emaciated old man lying in rags upon a stone floor, screaming, a horrible, drawn-out scream, a

scream of unendurable agony. . . .

"No! No! I beg you, I beg you. . . ."

"You lied to Lord Voldemort, Ollivander!"

"I did not. . . . I swear I did not. . . ."

"You sought to help Potter, to help him escape me!"

"I swear I did not . . . I believed a different wand would work. . . ."

"Explain, then, what happened. Lucius's wand is destroyed!"

"I cannot understand . . . The connection . . . exists only . . . between your two wands. . . ."

"*Lies!*"

"Please . . . I beg you. . . ."

And Harry saw the white hand raise its wand and felt Voldemort's surge of vicious anger, saw the frail old man on the floor writhe in agony —

"Harry?"

It was over as quickly as it had come: Harry stood shaking in the darkness, clutching the gate into the garden, his heart racing, his scar still tingling. It was several moments before he realized that Ron and Hermione were at his side.

"Harry, come back in the house," Hermione whispered. "You aren't still thinking of leaving?"

"Yeah, you've got to stay, mate," said Ron, thumping Harry on the back.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked, close enough now to look into Harry's face. "You look awful!"

"Well," said Harry shakily, "I probably look better than Ollivander. . . ."

When he had finished telling them what he had seen, Ron looked appalled, but Hermione downright terrified.

"But it was supposed to have stopped! Your scar — it wasn't supposed to do this anymore! You mustn't let that connection open up again — Dumbledore wanted you to close your mind!"

When he did not reply, she gripped his arm.

"Harry, he's taking over the Ministry and the newspapers and half the Wizarding world! Don't let him inside your head too!"

Gevalle Krygsman

"Hagrid?"

Harry sukkel om hom op te lig uit die puin van metaal en leer wat hom omring; sy hande sink in duime modderige water weg wanneer hy probeer opstaan. Hy kan nie verstaan waarheen Voldemort verdwyn het nie en verwag dat hy enige oomblik uit die donker op hom gaan afkom. Iets warms en nats drup by sy ken en van sy voorkop af. Hy kruip uit die modderpoel en strompel na Hagrid se groot, donker figuur op die grond.

"Hagrid? Hagrid, praat met my –"

Maar die donker figuur roer nie.

"Wie's daar? Is dit Potter? Is jy Harry Potter?"

Harry herken nie die man se stem nie. Dan roep 'n vrou: "Hulle het neergestort, Ted! In die tuin neergestort!"

Harry se kop duisel.

"Hagrid," herhaal hy bedremmeld en sy knieë knak.

Toe hy weer by sy bewussyn kom, lê hy op sy rug op wat soos kussings voel met 'n brandende pyn in sy ribbe en regterarm. Sy uittand is terug. Die litteken op sy voorkop klop nog steeds.

"Hagrid?"

Hy maak sy oë oop en sien hy lê op 'n rusbank in 'n onbekende, lampverligte sitkamer. Sy rugsak lê nat en modderig op die vloer, 'n entjie van hom af. 'n Ligtekop man met 'n groot maag hou Harry bekommerd dop.

"Hagrid is oukei," sê die man. "Die vrou sien na hom om. Hoe voel jy? Enigiets anders gebreek? Ek het jou ribbe, jou tand en jou arm reggemaak. Terloops, ek is Ted, Ted Tonks – Dora se pa."

Harry kom te vinnig regop; ligte ontplof voor sy oë en hy voel naar en duiselig.

"Voldemort –"

"Stadig nou," sê Ted Tonks. Hy sit sy hand op Harry se skouer en druk hom terug teen die kussings. "Jy was nou net in 'n lelike ongeluk. Wat presies het gebeur? Het iets met die motorfiets ver-

keerd gegaan? Het Arthur Weasley weer te ver gegaan, hy en sy Moggelkontrepsies?"

"Nee," sê Harry terwyl sy litteken soos 'n oop wond klop. "Doodseters, hope van hulle – ons is gejaag –"

"Doodseters?" vra Ted skerp. "Wat bedoel jy, Doodseters? Ek dog hulle weet nie jy word vannag oorgeplaas nie; ek dog –"

"Hulle het geweet," sê Harry.

Ted Tonks kyk op na die plafon asof hy die lug daardeur kan sien. "Wel, dan weet ons dat ons beskermende paljasse hulle weghou, nè? Hulle behoort nie binne 'n honderd tree hiervandaan te kan kom nie."

Nou verstaan Harry hoekom Voldemort verdwyn het; dit was op die plek waar die motorfiets deur die Orde se paljasversperring gebars het. Hy hoop maar net dit gaan aanhou werk: hy kan hom indink hoe Voldemort op hierdie einste oomblik 'n honderd tree bokant hulle 'n manier soek om deur dit wat Harry as 'n groot, deurskynende borrel visualiseer, te dring.

Hy swaai sy bene van die rusbank af; hy moet Hagrid eers met sy eie oë sien voor hy sal glo hy lewe. Hy het egter skaars opgestaan toe 'n deur oopgaan en Hagrid daardeur beur, sy gesig vol modder en bloed, effens mank, maar wonder bo wonder lewend.

"Harry!"

Hy stamp twee delikate tafels en 'n aspidistra om, is binne twee tree by Harry en gee hom 'n druk wat sy pas reggemaakte ribbes amper laat kraak. "Demmit, Harry, hoe het jy daaruit gekom? Ek dog ons is al twee bokveld toe."

"Ja, ek ook. Ek kan nie glo –"

Harry sluk sy woorde: hy het so pas die vrou opgemerk wat agter Hagrid by die vertrek ingekom het.

"Jy!" skree hy en steek sy hand in sy sak, maar dit is leeg.

"Jou towerstaf is hier, seun," sê Ted en tik daarmee op Harry se arm. "Dit het reg langsaan jou geval; ek het dit opgetel. En dis my vrou op wie jy so skree."

"O, ek's – ek's jammer."

Soos sy verder by die vertrek inbeweeg, lyk mevrou Tonks baie minder na haar suster Bellatrix: haar hare is 'n ligte, sagte bruin en haar oë is groter en vriendeliker. Sy lyk nogtans 'n bietjie uit die hoogte ná Harry se uitroep.

"Wat het met ons dogter gebeur?" vra sy. "Hagrid sê julle is voorgelê; waar is Nymphadora?"

"Ek weet nie," sê Harry. "Ons weet nie wat met enigeen van die ander gebeur het nie."

Sy en Ted kyk na mekaar. 'n Mengsel van vrees en skuldgevoel pak Harry beet toe hy hulle uitdrukkings sien; as enigeen van die ander dood is, is dit sy skuld, alles sy skuld. Hy het tot die plan ingestem deur vir hulle sy hare te gee . . .

"Die Poortsleutel," sê hy toe hy skielik daarvan onthou. "Ons moet by Die Konynenes kom en uitvind – dan kan ons vir julle 'n boodskap stuur, of – of Tonks sal, sodra sy –"

"Dora sal veilig wees, Dromeda," sê Ted. "Sy weet wat sy doen; sy't al baie noue ontkomings met die Aurors gehad. Die Poortsleutel is daardeur," voeg hy by vir Harry. "Dis veronderstel om oor drie minute te vertrek, as julle daarmee wil gaan."

"Ja, ons wil," sê Harry. Hy gryp sy rugsak en swaai dit oor sy skouers. "Ek –"

Hy kyk na mevrou Tonks en wil verskoning vra vir die toestand van vrees waarin hy haar agterlaat en waarvoor hy so vreeslik verantwoordelik voel, maar hy kan nie aan enige woorde dink wat nie leeg en onopreg sal klink nie.

"Ek sal vir Tonks – Dora – sê sy moet julle laat weet wanneer sy . . . Dankie dat julle ons reggedokter het; dankie vir alles. Ek –"

Hy is bly om by die vertrek uit te kom en volg Ted Tonks deur 'n klein portaal en by 'n slaapkamer in. Hagrid kom agterna en buk laag sodat hy nie sy kop teen die deur se latei moet stamp nie.

"Daar's hy, seun. Dis die Poortsleutel."

Meneer Tonks beduie na 'n klein haarborsel met 'n silwer agterkant wat op die spieëltafel lê.

"Dankie," sê Harry en reik uit om 'n vinger daarop te sit, gereed om te vertrek.

"Wag vir 'n oomblik," sê Hagrid en kyk om. "Waar's Hedwig, Harry?"

"Sy . . . sy's getref," sê Harry.

Die besef tref hom met 'n slag: hy skaam hom vir homself toe trane sy oë brand. Die uil was sy kameraad, sy beste skakel met die towerwêreld elke keer dat hy noodgedwonge terug na die Dursleys toe moes gaan.

Hagrid steek 'n groot hand uit en klop hom pynlik op die skouer.

"Toemaar," sê hy skor. "Toemaar. Sy't 'n goeie lewe gehad –"

"Hagrid!" waarsku Ted Tonks, want die haarborsel gloei helderblou en Hagrid sit sy voorvinger net-net betyds daarop.

Met 'n pluk agter sy naeltjie asof 'n onsigbare hoek aan 'n lyn hom vorentoe trek, word Harry die niet in geruk. Hy tol onkontroleerbaar met sy vinger stewig vas op die Poortsleutel terwyl hy en

Hagrid wegvlieg van meneer Tonks af: sekondes later stamp Harry se voete op harde grond en hy val op sy hande en knieë op Die Konynenes se werf neer. Hy hoor krete. Harry gooi die haarborsel wat nie meer gloei nie eenkant, staan op, wankel effens, en sien mevrou Weasley en Ginny by die agterdeur se trappies afhardloop terwyl Hagrid, wat ook geval het toe hy geland het, sukkelend op die been kom.

"Harry? Is jy die regte Harry? Wat het gebeur? Waar is die ander?" roep mevrou Weasley uit.

"Hoe bedoel mevrou? Is niemand anders nog hier nie?" vra Harry uitasem.

Die antwoord is duidelik op mevrou Weasley se bleek gesig geets.

"Die Doodseters het ons ingewag," vertel Harry vir haar. "Ons was omring die oomblik toe ons opstyg – hulle't geweet dit was vanaand – ek weet nie wat met enige van die ander gebeur het nie. Vier van hulle het ons gejaag, ons het net-net weggekom, en toe haal Voldemort ons in –"

Hy kan aan sy stemtoon hoor hoe hy homself probeer regverdig, die pleidooi vir haar om te verstaan hoekom hy nie weet wat met haar seuns gebeur het nie, maar –

"Dankie tog julle's veilig," sê sy en druk hom teen haar vas in 'n omhelsing wat hy voel hy nie verdien nie.

"Jy't nie dalk bietjie brandewyn nie, Molly?" vra Hagrid effens wankelrig. "Vir medisinale doeleindes."

Sy kon dit met towerkrag ontbied het, maar wanneer sy vinnig weer by die skewe huis ingaan, weet Harry sy wil haar gesig wegsteek. Hy draai na Ginny en sy beantwoord dadelik sy onuitgesproke pleidooi vir inligting.

"Ron en Tonks moes eerste terug gewees het, maar hulle het hulle Poortsleutel gemis; dit het sonder hulle teruggekom," sê sy en wys na 'n geroeste oliekan wat naby hulle op die grond lê. "En daai een," sê sy en wys na 'n stokou seilskoen, "moes Pa en Fred s'n gewees het; hulle was veronderstel om tweede te wees. Jy en Hagrid moes derde wees en," sy kyk op haar horlosie, "as hulle dit gemaak het, behoort George en Lupin oor omtrent 'n minuut hier te wees."

Mevrou Weasley verskyn weer met 'n bottel brandewyn wat sy vir Hagrid gee. Hy trek die prop uit en slaan alles met een sluk weg.

"Ma!" roep Ginny uit en wys na 'n plek 'n entjie weg.

'n Blou lig verskyn in die donker; dit word groter en helderder, en Lupin en George verskyn, al tollende en dan val hulle. Harry

weet onmiddellik iets is verkeerd: Lupin ondersteun 'n bewustelose George wie se gesig met bloed oortrek is.

Harry hardloop vorentoe en gryp George se bene. Hy en Lupin dra George saam by die huis in en deur die kombuis na die sitkamer waar hulle hom op die rusbank neerlê. Toe die lamplig op George se gesig val, snak Ginny na haar asem en Harry se maag trek saam: een van George se ore makeer. Dié kant van sy kop en nek is deurweek met nat, skokkende helderrooi bloed.

Mevrou Weasley het skaars oor haar seun afgebuk of Lupin gryp Harry aan die boarm en sleep hom allesbehalwe sagkens terug by die kombuis in waar Hagrid nog steeds probeer om sy logge lyf by die agterdeur in te wurm.

"Haai!" sê Hagrid verontwaardig. "Los hom! Los vir Harry!"

Lupin ignoreer hom.

"Watter dierasie het in die hoek gesit die eerste keer toe Harry Potter in my kantoor by Hogwarts gekom het?" vra hy en skud Harry effens. "Antwoord my!"

"'n – 'n Grindeloog in 'n tenk, was dit nie?"

Lupin los Harry en val terug teen 'n kombuiskas.

"Was dit nou nodig?" brul Hagrid.

"Ek's jammer, Harry, maar ek moes seker maak," sê Lupin saaklik. "Ons is verraai. Voldemort het geweet jy word vanaand oorgeplaas en die enigste mense wat hom daarvan kon vertel het, was direk by die plan betrokke. Jy kon dalk 'n bedrieër gewees het."

"So hoekom ondersoek jy my nie?" hyg Hagrid wat nog steeds sukkel om by die deur in te kom.

"Jy's 'n halfreus," sê Lupin en kyk op na Hagrid. "Die Polisouspaljas is net vir gewone mense ontwerp."

"Niemand van die Orde sou Voldemort van ons planne vir vanaand vertel het nie," sê Harry: die gedagte is te aaklig vir hom; hy kan dit nie van een van hulle glo nie. "Voldemort het my net aan die einde ingehaal; hy't nie aan die begin geweet watter een is ek nie. As hy seker was van die plan, sou hy van die begin af geweet het ek is die een by Hagrid."

"Voldemort het julle ingehaal?" vra Lupin skerp. "Wat het gebeur? Hoe het julle ontsnap?"

Harry verduidelik kortliks hoe die Doodseters wat hulle agtervolg het hom skynbaar as die regte Harry herken het, hoe hulle die agtervolging laat vaar het, en Voldemort moes ontbied het, wat verskyn het net voor Harry en Hagrid die veiligheid van Tonks se ouers bereik het.

"Hulle het jou herken? Maar hoe? Wat het jy gedoen?"

"Ek . . ." Harry probeer onthou; die hele reis is vir hom 'n waas van paniek en verwarring. "Ek het Stan Shunpike gesien . . . jy weet, die ou wat die kondukteur op die Nagtelike Ridderbus was? En ek het hom probeer Ontwapen in plaas van – wel, hy weet mos nie wat hy doen nie, of hoe? Hy moet ge-Imperius wees!"

Lupin lyk geskok.

"Harry, die tyd vir Ontwapening is verby! Hierdie mense probeer jou vang en doodmaak! Bedwelm ten minste as jy nie bereid is om dood te maak nie!"

"Ons was honderde voet in die lug op! Stan is nie homself nie, en as ek hom Bedwelm het, sou hy geval het en dan was hy dood, en dan was dit net so goed of ek *Avada Kedavra* gebruik het! *Expelliarmus* het my twee jaar gelede uit Voldemort se kloue gered," voeg Harry uitdagend by. Lupin herinner hom aan die uittartende Hoesenproeser, Zacharias Smith, wat Harry gekoggel het omdat hy Dumbledore se Soldate wou leer hoe om te Ontwapen.

"Ja, Harry," sê Lupin met pynlike selfbeheersing, "en 'n groot aantal Doodseters het dit aanskou! Vergewe my, maar dit was destyds 'n baie ongewone skuif, onder dreigende doodsgevaar. Om dit vanaand te herhaal voor Doodseters wat dit daardie eerste keer óf aanskou óf daarvan gehoor het, grens aan selfmoord!"

"So jy dink ek moes Stan Shunpike doodgemaak het?" vra Harry kwaad.

"Natuurlik nie," sê Lupin, "maar die Doodseters – om die waarheid te sê, die meeste mense – sou verwag het jy gaan terugveg! *Expelliarmus* is 'n nuttige towerspreuk, Harry, maar die Doodseters dink blykbaar dit is jou spesialiteit, en ek vra jou mooi, vergeet daarvan!"

Lupin laat Harry soos 'n idioot voel, maar daar is nietemin nog 'n greintjie opstandigheid in hom.

"Ek gaan nie mense uit my pad blaas net omdat hulle daar is nie," sê Harry. "Dis Voldemort se werk."

Lupin se antwoord gaan verlore: Hagrid slaag uiteindelik daarin om by die deur in te skuur. Hy strompel na 'n stoel toe en gaan sit, maar dit stort onder hom inmekaar. Harry ignoreer Hagrid se mengsel van swetse en verskonings en spreek Lupin weer aan.

"Sal George oukei wees?"

Dit lyk of al Lupin se frustrasie met Harry by hierdie vraag wegvloei.

"Ek dink so, hoewel dit onmoontlik gaan wees om sy oor te vervang, want dit is deur 'n vloek afgeruk –"

Daar is 'n geskuifel buitekant. Lupin duik na die agterdeur; Harry spring oor Hagrid se bene en hardloop uit werf toe.

Twee figure het op die werf verskyn en soos Harry hulle tegemoet hardloop, besef hy dit is Hermione, wat nou weer na haar gewone self verander, en Kingsley, wat saam met haar aan 'n gebuigde klerehanger vashou. Hermione werp haarself in Harry se arms, maar Kingsley toon geen blydskap ten aanskoue van enigeen van hulle nie. Harry sien oor Hermione se skouer hoe hy sy towerstaf lig en dit op Lupin se borskas rig.

"Wat was Albus Dumbledore se laaste woorde aan ons twee?"

"*'Harry is ons enigste hoop. Vertrou hom,'* " sê Lupin kalm.

Kingsley mik nou met sy towerstaf na Harry, maar Lupin sê: "Dis hy, ek het seker gemaak!"

"Nou goed, nou goed!" sê Kingsley en steek sy towerstaf weer onder sy mantel in. "Maar iemand het ons verraai! Hulle't geweet, hulle't geweet dit was vanaand!"

"Dit wil so voorkom," antwoord Lupin, "maar blykbaar het hulle nie besef daar gaan sewe Harrys wees nie."

"Skrale troos!" grom Kingsley. "Wie anders is terug?"

"Net Harry, Hagrid, ek en George."

Hermione smoor 'n gilletjie agter haar hand.

"Wat het met julle gebeur?" vra Lupin vir Kingsley.

"Agtervolg deur vyf, twee beseer, een moontlik gedood," rammel Kingsley af, "en ons het Jy-Weet-Wie ook gesien. Hy het halfpad by die jaagtog aangesluit, maar toe taamlik vinnig verdwyn. Remus, hy kan –"

"Vlieg," help Harry. "Ek het hom ook gesien; hy het my en Hagrid agterna gesit."

"So dis hoekom hy weg is – om julle te agtervolg!" sê Kingsley. "Ek kon nie verstaan hoekom hy verdwyn het nie. Maar wat het hom van teiken laat verander?"

"Harry het Stan Shunpike 'n bietjie te vriendelik behandel," sê Lupin.

"Stan?" herhaal Hermione. "Maar ek dog hy is in Azkaban?"

Kingsley lag vreugdeloos.

"Hermione, daar was duidelik 'n massa-ontsnapping wat die Ministerie toegesmeer het. Travers se kap het afgeval toe ek 'n vloek op hom afvuur en hy's ook veronderstel om opgesluit te wees. Maar wat het met julle gebeur, Remus? Waar's George?"

"Hy't 'n oor verloor," sê Lupin.

"'n Oor?" herhaal Hermione in 'n hoë stem.

"Snape se werk," sê Lupin.

"*Snape?*" skree Harry. "Jy het nie gesê –"

"Sy kap het ook in die jaagtog afgeval. *Sectumsempra* was nog

altyd 'n spesialiteit van Snape. Ek wens ek kon sê ek het hom in eie munt terugbetaal, maar ek het my hande vol gehad om George op die besem te hou nadat hy beseer is, want hy het soveel bloed verloor."

Stilte daal tussen die vier van hulle neer terwyl hulle na die lug opkyk. Daar is nie 'n teken van beweging nie; die sterre staar terug, doodstil, onverskillig, geen vlieënde vriende voor hulle nie. Waar is Ron? Waar is Fred en meneer Weasley? Waar is Bill, Fleur, Tonks, Maloog en Mundungus?

"Harry, help gou hier!" roep Hagrid hees van die deur af; hy sit al weer daarin vas. Bly om iets te kan doen, trek Harry hom los en beweeg dan deur die leë kombuis terug na die sitkamer toe waar mevrou Weasley en Ginny nog steeds na George omsien. Mevrou Weasley het sy bloeding nou stopgesit en in die lamplig sien Harry 'n skoon, gapende gat waar George se oor eers was.

"Hoe gaan dit met hom?"

Mevrou Weasley kyk om en sê: "Ek kan dit nie laat teruggroei nie, nie as dit deur Donker Towerkuns verwyder is nie. Maar dit kon baie erger gewees het . . . Hy lewe."

"Ja," sê Harry. "Dankie vader."

"Het ek iemand anders op die werf gehoor?" vra Ginny.

"Hermione en Kingsley," sê Harry.

"Dankie tog," fluister Ginny. Hulle kyk na mekaar; Harry wil haar omhels, haar vashou; hy gee nie eens om dat mevrou Weasley daar is nie, maar voor hy sy instink kan volg, is daar 'n harde slag in die kombuis.

"Ek sal bewys wie ek is, Kingsley, ná ek my seun gesien het! Uit my pad, as jy weet wat goed vir jou is!"

Harry het meneer Weasley nog nooit voorheen so hoor skree nie. Hy bars by die woonkamer in, sy bleskop blink van sweet, sy bril skeef, Fred reg agter hom, albei bleek maar onbeseer.

"Arthur!" snik mevrou Weasley. "O, dankie tog!"

"Hoe gaan dit met hom?"

Meneer Weasley val op sy knieë langs George neer. Vir die eerste keer vandat Harry hom ken, lyk dit of Fred nie weet wat om te sê nie. Hy staar oor die agterkant van die rusbank na sy tweelingbroer se wond asof hy nie kan glo wat hy sien nie.

Miskien het die geluid van Fred en hulle pa se aankoms hom wakker gemaak, want George roer.

"Hoe voel jy, Georgie?" fluister mevrou Weasley.

George se vingers gryp na die kant van sy kop.

"Heilig," prewel hy.

"Wat's fout met hom?" vra Fred skor en lyk angsbevange. "Is sy brein aangetas?"

"Heilig," herhaal George wat sy oë oopmaak en na sy broer opkyk. "Jy sien . . . ek's heilig en Ma is *huilig*. Het jy dit, Fred?" Mevrou Weasley huil nou nog harder. Daar kom kleur in Fred se bleek gesig.

"Pateties," sê hy vir George. "Pateties! Die hele wye wêreld se oorhumor lê voor jou oop en jy gaan vir *huilig*?"

"Aag wel," sê George en grinnik vir sy traandeurdrenkte ma, "nou sal Ma ons darem uitmekaar kan ken."

Hy kyk om.

"Haai, Harry – jy is mos Harry, nè?"

"Ja, ek is," sê Harry en beweeg nader aan die rusbank.

"Wel, ons het jou ten minste oukei hier gekry," sê George. "Hoekom is Ron en Bill ook om my siekbed nie?"

"Hulle is nog nie terug nie, George," sê mevrou Weasley. George se grinnik verflou. Harry loer na Ginny en wys vir haar om saam met hom buitentoe te gaan. Terwyl hulle deur die kombuis loop, sê sy in 'n sagte stem: "Ron en Tonks behoort nou al terug te gewees het. Hulle hoef nie ver te gereis het nie; tant Muriel is nie so ver hiervandaan nie."

Harry sê niks nie. Hy probeer die vrees in hom al vandat hy hier by Die Konynenes aangekom het in bedwang hou, maar nou oorweldig dit hom; dit voel of dit oor sy vel kruip, in sy borskas klop, sy keel verstop. Terwyl hulle met die agterste trappies af op die donker werf stap, vat Ginny sy hand.

Kingsley loop met lang treë vorentoe en agtertoe, en kyk elke keer dat hy omdraai op na die lug. Dit herinner Harry aan oom Vernon wat 'n miljoen jaar gelede in die woonkamer so op en af geloop het. Hagrid, Hermione en Lupin staan skouer aan skouer en staar in stilte boontoe. Nie een van hulle kyk om toe Harry en Ginny by hulle stille nagwaak aansluit nie.

Die minute rek tot wat net sowel jare kan wees. Die geringste beduidenis van 'n briesie laat hulle almal wip en omdraai na die fluisterende bos of boom in die hoop dat een van die Orde se vermiste lede dalk ongedeerd tussen die blare sal uitspring –

En dan verskyn 'n besem direk bokant hulle en skiet af grond toe –

"Dis hulle!" skree Hermione.

Tonks land gly 'n ent en laat grond en klippies na alle kante toe opspat.

"Remus!" roep Tonks uit terwyl sy van haar besem af in Lupin se

arms in waggel. Sy gesig is strak en wit; hy lyk nie in staat om te praat nie. Ron struikel verdwaas tot by Harry en Hermione.

"Jy's oukei," mompel hy voor Hermione hom bevlieg en 'n stywe druk gee.

"Ek dog – ek dog –"

"Ek's oukei," sê Ron en klop haar op die rug. "Ek's rêrig oukei."

"Ron was wonderlik," sê Tonks warm en los Lupin. "Fantasties. Hy't een van die Doodseters Bedwelm, reg in die kop, en as jy van 'n vlieënde besem af na 'n bewegende teiken mik –"

"Het jy?" vra Hermione en staar op na Ron met haar arms nog steeds om sy nek.

"Jy klink altyd so verbaas," sê hy effens knorrig en los haar. "Is ons laaste terug?"

"Nee," sê Ginny, "ons wag nog vir Bill en Fleur en Maloog en Mundungus. Ek gaan gou vir Ma en Pa sê jy's oukei, Ron –"

Sy hardloop terug binnetoe.

"Hoekom het julle so lank gevat? Wat het gebeur?" Lupin klink amper kwaad vir Tonks.

"Bellatrix," sê Tonks. "Sy soek my bloed net soveel soos Harry s'n, Remus; sy het baie hard probeer om my dood te maak. Ek wens ek kon haar bygekom het; ek skuld Bellatrix. Maar ons het Rodolphus definitief beseer . . . en toe ons by Ron se tant Muriel kom, het ons ons Poortsleutel gemis en sy het aanhou kloek om ons –"

'n Spier spring in Lupin se kaak. Hy knik, maar lyk nie in staat om enigiets anders te sê nie.

"So wat het met julle klomp gebeur?" vra Tonks en draai na Harry, Hermione en Kingsley.

Hulle vertel hoe hulle reise verloop het, maar die hele tyd lê die feit dat Bill, Fleur, Maloog en Mundungus nog steeds nie hier is nie op hulle soos ryp waarvan die ysige byt al moeiliker en moeiliker word om te ignoreer.

"Ek sal terug Downingstraat toe moet gaan. Ek moes al 'n uur gelede daar gewees het," sê Kingsley uiteindelik ná hy sy oë vir oulaas oor die hemelruim laat gaan het. "Laat weet my wanneer hulle terugkom."

Lupin knik. Met 'n wuif na die ander loop Kingsley in die donker na die hek toe. Harry verbeel hom hy hoor 'n dowwe plofgeluid soos Kingsley net buite Die Konynenes se grens Disappareer.

Meneer en mevrou Weasley kom by die agterste trappies afgehardloop met Ginny agterna. Albei ouers omhels Ron voor hulle na Lupin en Tonks draai.

"Dankie," sê mevrou Weasley, "vir ons seuns."

"Moenie laf wees nie, Molly," sê Tonks dadelik.
"Hoe gaan dit met George?" vra Lupin.
"Wat's verkeerd met hom?" kom Ron tussenbeide.
"Hy't sy oor –"
Maar die einde van mevrou Weasley se sin word verdoof deur almal wat saam uitroep: 'n Testral het so pas aangesweef gekom en land 'n entjie van hulle af. Bill en Fleur gly van sy rug af, windverwaaid maar ongedeerd.
"Bill! Dankie vader, dankie vader –"
Mevrou Weasley hardloop vorentoe, maar die drukkie wat Bill vir haar gee, is bloot meganies. Hy kyk reguit na sy pa en sê: "Maloog is dood."
Niemand praat nie, niemand beweeg nie. Harry voel asof iets binne in hom val, deur die aarde val en hom vir goed verlaat.
"Ons het dit gesien," sê Bill; Fleur knik en die traanspore op haar wange glinster in die kombuisvenster se lig. "Dit het gebeur net nadat ons uit die sirkel weggebreek het; Maloog en Dung was naby ons en hulle het ook noordwaarts gemik. Voldemort – hy kan vlieg – het reguit op hulle afgepyl. Dung het paniekerig geraak, ek het hom hoor skree, Maloog het hom probeer keer, maar hy het ge-Disappareer. Voldemort se vloek het Maloog vol in die gesig getref, hy het agteroor van sy besem afgeval en – daar was niks wat ons kon doen nie, niks nie, daar was 'n halfdosyn van hulle op ons hakke –"
Bill se stem breek.
"Natuurlik kon julle niks gedoen het nie," sê Lupin.
Hulle staan almal na mekaar en kyk. Harry kan dit nog nie heeltemal verwerk nie. Maloog dood; dit kan nie wees nie . . . Maloog, so taai, so dapper, die grootste bittereinder van almal . . .
Uiteindelik begin dit tot almal deurdring, al sê niemand so nie, dat dit geen doel dien om langer op die werf te wag nie. Hulle volg meneer en mevrou Weasley in stilte terug by Die Konynenes in na die sitkamer waar Fred en George saam lag.
"Wat's fout?" vra Fred wat hulle gesigte sien wanneer hulle inkom. "Wat het gebeur? Wie's –?"
"Maloog," sê meneer Weasley. "Dood."
Die tweeling se glimlagte verander in uitdrukkings van skok. Niemand weet blykbaar wat om te doen nie. Tonks huil sag in 'n sakdoek; Harry weet sy was na aan Maloog: sy was sy gunsteling en sy beskermling by die Ministerie van Towerkuns. Hagrid, wat op die vloer gaan sit het in die hoek waar hy die meeste ruimte het, drukdruk sy oë droog met sy sakdoek wat so groot soos 'n tafeldoek is.

Bill loop na die buffet toe en haal 'n bottel Vuurwhisky en 'n klompie glase uit.

"Hier," sê hy en met 'n swiep van sy towerstaf laat hy twaalf vol glase deur die vertrek na elkeen van hulle toe sweef terwyl hy die dertiende een omhoog hou. "Op Maloog."

"Maloog," sê hulle almal en drink.

"Maloog," eggo Hagrid effens laat en hik.

Die Vuurwhisky skroei Harry se keel: dit is asof dit weer gevoel terugbrand in hom, die doodsheid en gevoel van onwerklikheid verdryf en hom aanvuur met iets wat soos moed voel.

"So Mundungus het verdwyn?" sê Lupin wat sy glas met een sluk geledig het.

Die atmosfeer verander onmiddellik: almal lyk gespanne en hou Lupin dop. Dit voel vir Harry asof hulle wil hê Lupin moet voortgaan, maar terselfdertyd ook effens bang is vir wat hulle dalk mag hoor.

"Ek weet wat julle dink," sê Bill, "en ek het ook daaroor gewonder op pad terug hierheen, want dit het gelyk of hulle ons verwag het, of hoe? Maar Mundungus kon ons nie verraai het nie. Hulle het nie geweet daar gaan sewe Harrys wees nie; dit het hulle verwar die oomblik toe ons verskyn, en ingeval julle vergeet het, dit was Mundungus wat daardie slenter voorgestel het. Hoekom sou hy nie vir hulle van die belangrikste punt vertel het nie? Ek dink Dung het kop verloor, dis so eenvoudig soos dit. Hy wou van die begin af nie saamkom nie, maar Maloog het hom gedwing en Jy-Weet-Wie het direk op hulle afgepyl: dis genoeg om enigiemand paniekerig te maak."

"Jy-Weet-Wie het presies opgetree soos Maloog verwag het hy sou," sê Tonks snuiwend. "Maloog het gesê hy sal verwag dat die regte Harry by die taaiste, mees ervare Aurors is. Hy het Maloog eerste agterna gesit en toe Mundungus die geheim verklap, het hy na Kingsley toe oorgeslaan . . ."

"Ja, en dit is alles goed en wel," kom Fleur tussenbeide, "maar dit verduidelik nog steeds nie 'oe 'ulle geweet het ons gaan 'arry vanaand verskuif nie. Iemand moet agterlosig gewees 'et. Iemand 'et die datum vir 'n buitestander laat uitglip. Dit is die enigste verklaring vir 'oe 'ulle van die datum geweet 'et, maar nie die 'ele plan nie."

Sy kyk stip van die een na die ander met die traanspore nog op haar pragtige gesig geëts en daag hulle in stilte uit om haar te weerspreek. Niemand doen dit nie. Die enigste geluid wat die stilte verbreek, is Hagrid se gehik van agter sy sakdoek uit. Harry loer na Hagrid wat so pas sy lewe gewaag het om Harry s'n te red – Hagrid vir

wie hy lief is, wat hy vertrou, wat eenkeer uitoorlê is om vir Voldemort deurslaggewende inligting te gee in ruil vir 'n draakeier . . .

"Nee," sê Harry hardop en hulle kyk almal verbaas na hom: dit is asof die Vuurwhisky sy stem volume gegee het. "Ek bedoel . . . as iemand 'n fout gemaak het," gaan Harry verder, "en iets laat uitglip het, dan weet ek daai een het nie bedoel om dit te doen nie. Dit is nie daai persoon se skuld nie," herhaal hy, weer 'n bietjie harder as wat hy gewoonlik praat. "Ons moet mekaar vertrou. Ek vertrou julle almal; ek dink nie enigeen in hierdie vertrek sal my ooit aan Voldemort uitlewer nie."

Nog 'n stilte volg op sy woorde. Hulle kyk almal na hom; Harry voel weer effens verbouereerd en drink nog Vuurwhisky, net om iets te doen. Terwyl hy drink, dink hy aan Maloog. Maloog was altyd snydend krities oor Dumbledore se bereidwilligheid om mense te vertrou.

"Goed gesê, Harry," sê Fred onverwags.

"Ja, 'oor-'oor," sê George en loer onderlangs na Fred wie se mondhoek effentjies opkrul.

Lupin kyk na Harry met 'n vreemde uitdrukking op sy gesig: dit grens aan bejammering.

"Dink jy ek is 'n gek?" dring Harry aan om te weet.

"Nee, ek dink jy is nes James," sê Lupin, "wat dit as die toppunt van oneer sou beskou om sy vriende te wantrou."

Harry weet waarop Lupin afstuur: dat sy pa deur sy vriend, Peter Pettigrew, verraai is. Hy voel buite alle verhouding kwaad. Hy wil argumenteer, maar Lupin draai weg van hom af, sit sy glas op 'n sytafeltjie neer, wend hom tot Bill en sê: "Ons het werk om te doen. Ek kan vir Kingsley vra of –"

"Nee," sê Bill dadelik. "Ek sal dit doen; ek sal kom."

"Waarheen gaan julle?" vra Tonks en Fleur tegelyk.

"Maloog se liggaam," sê Lupin. "Ons moet dit terugkry."

"Kan dit nie –?" begin mevrou Weasley en kyk pleitend na Bill.

"Wag nie?" sê Bill. "Nie tensy Ma liewer wil hê die Doodseters moet dit vat nie."

Niemand praat nie. Lupin en Bill groet en vertrek.

Die res van hulle val nou in stoele neer, almal behalwe Harry wat bly staan. Die skielikheid en finaliteit van die dood is soos 'n teenwoordigheid tussen hulle.

"Ek moet ook gaan," sê Harry.

Tien paar geskokte oë kyk na hom.

"Moenie laf wees nie, Harry," sê mevrou Weasley. "Waarvan praat jy?"

"Ek kan nie hier bly nie."

Hy vryf sy voorkop: dit prik weer; dit was meer as 'n jaar gelede so seer.

"Julle is almal in gevaar terwyl ek hier is. Ek wil nie –"

"Moenie laf wees nie!" sê mevrou Weasley weer. "Die hele punt van vanaand was om jou veilig hier te kry, en dankie tog dit het gewerk. En Fleur het ingestem om hier te trou eerder as in Frankryk; ons het alles gereël sodat ons almal bymekaar kan bly en na jou kan kyk –"

Sy verstaan nie; sy laat hom erger voel, nie beter nie.

"As Voldemort uitvind ek's hier –"

"Maar hoekom sal hy?" vra mevrou Weasley.

"Daar is 'n dosyn ander plekke waar jy nou kan wees, Harry," sê meneer Weasley. "Daar's nie 'n manier hoe hy kan weet in watter skuilhuis jy is nie."

"Ek is nie oor myself bekommerd nie," sê Harry.

"Ons weet dit," sê meneer Weasley sag, "maar dit sal al ons moeite vanaand bra nutteloos laat lyk as jy nou hier weggaan."

"Jy gaan nêrens nie," grom Hagrid. "Demmit, Harry, ná alles waardeur ons is om jou hier te kry?"

"Ja, wat van my flippen oor?" sê George en hys homself teen sy kussings op.

"Ek weet, maar –"

"Maloog sou nie wou hê –"

"EK WEET!" brul Harry.

Hy voel beleër en afgepers: dink hulle hy weet nie wat hulle vir hom gedoen het nie; verstaan hulle nie dit is juis daarom dat hy nou hier wil weggaan nie, voor hulle nog meer om sy ontwil moet ly? Daar is 'n lang, ongemaklike stilte waarin sy litteken aanhoudend prik en klop, en wat uiteindelik deur mevrou Weasley verbreek word.

"Waar's Hedwig, Harry?" vra sy paaiend. "Ons kan haar by Pigwidgeon sit en vir haar iets te ete gee."

Sy ingewande trek soos 'n vuis saam. Hy kan nie vir haar die waarheid vertel nie. Hy drink sy laaste bietjie Vuurwhisky sodat hy nie hoef te antwoord nie.

"Wag tot almal hoor jy't dit weer reggekry, Harry," sê Hagrid. "Jy't weer weggekom, hy was óp jou, maar jy't hom afgeweer!"

"Dit was nie ek nie," sê Harry kortaf. "Dit was my towerstaf. My towerstaf het op sy eie gewerk."

Ná 'n paar oomblikke sê Hermione versigtig: "Maar dis onmoontlik, Harry. Jy bedoel seker jy het towerkrag gebruik sonder dat jy dit bedoel het; jy het instinktief gereageer."

"Nee," sê Harry. "Die motorfiets was besig om te val, ek kon nie uitmaak waar Voldemort was nie, maar my towerstaf het in my hand getol en hom gekry en 'n vloek op hom afgevuur, en dit was nie eens 'n vloek wat ek herken het nie. Ek het nog nooit vantevore goue vlamme laat verskyn nie."

"Dikwels," sê meneer Weasley, "wanneer 'n mens onder druk geplaas word, kom jy vorendag met towerkrag waarvan jy nooit kon droom nie. Klein kindertjies ondervind dikwels dat hulle sonder enige opleiding –"

"Dis nie hoe dit was nie," sê Harry deur geknersde tande. Sy litteken brand: hy is kwaad en gefrustreerd; hy haat die idee dat hulle almal dink hy beskik oor mag wat Voldemort s'n kan ewenaar.

Niemand sê enigiets nie. Hy weet hulle glo hom nie. Noudat hy daaraan dink, hy het nog nooit voorheen gehoor van 'n towerstaf wat op sy eie towerkuns beoefen nie.

Sy litteken skroei van pyn; hy sukkel om nie hardop te kreun nie. Hy mompel iets van vars lug, sit sy glas neer en gaan by die vertrek uit.

Soos hy die donker werf oorsteek, kyk die groot, skeletagtige Testral op, laat ritsel sy enorme, vlermuisagtige vlerke, en wei dan weer verder. Harry stop by die hek wat tuin toe lei, staar uit oor die plante wat so geil groei, vryf sy kloppende voorkop en dink aan Dumbledore.

Dumbledore sou hom geglo het, hy weet dit. Dumbledore sou geweet het hoe en hoekom Harry se towerstaf onafhanklik opgetree het, want Dumbledore het altyd die antwoorde gehad: hy het geweet van towerstawwe; hy het vir Harry die vreemde verband tussen sy towerstaf en Voldemort s'n verduidelik . . . maar Dumbledore, soos Maloog, soos Sirius, soos sy ouers, soos sy arme uil, is weg na waar Harry nooit weer met hulle kan praat nie. Hy kry 'n brandgevoel in sy keel wat niks met Vuurwhisky te doen het nie . . .

En toe, uit die bloute, is die pyn in sy litteken feller as ooit vantevore. Terwyl hy sy voorkop vasgryp en sy oë toemaak, skree daar 'n stem in sy kop.

"Jy't vir my gesê die probleem sal opgelos wees as ek iemand anders se towerstaf gebruik!"

En voor sy geestesoog plof die visioen oop van 'n uitgeteerde ou man wat in vodde op 'n klipvloer lê en gil: 'n aaklige, uitgerekte gil, 'n gil van ondraaglike foltering . . .

"Nee! Nee! Ek smeek jou, ek smeek jou . . ."

"Jy het vir die Heer Voldemort gelieg, Ollivander!"

"Ek het nie . . . Ek sweer ek het nie . . ."

"Jy het Potter probeer help sodat hy van my kon ontsnap!"
"Ek sweer ek het nie . . . Ek het geglo 'n ander towerstaf sou werk . . ."
"Nou verduidelik dan wat gebeur het. Lucius se towerstaf is vernietig!"
"Ek kan dit nie verstaan nie . . . Die verband . . . bestaan slegs . . . tussen julle twee towerstawwe . . ."
"*Leuens!*"
"Asseblief . . . Ek smeek jou . . ."
En Harry sien hoe die wit hand sy towerstaf lig en voel hoe die wrede woede in Voldemort opwel, sien die ou man op die vloer wriemel van pyn –
"Harry?"
Dit is so vinnig verby as wat dit gekom het. Harry staan en bewe in die donker; hy klou aan die tuinhekkie vas, sy hart klop wild en sy litteken tintel nog. Dit neem 'n hele paar oomblikke voor hy besef Ron en Hermione staan langs hom.
"Harry, kom terug huis toe," fluister Hermione. "Jy dink tog nie nog steeds daaraan om te gaan nie?"
"Jy moet hier bly, ou pel," sê Ron en slaan Harry op die rug.
"Is jy oukei?" vra Hermione wat nou naby genoeg is om Harry se gesig te sien. "Jy lyk verskriklik!"
"Wel," sê Harry bewerig, "ek lyk darem seker beter as Ollivander . . ."
Toe hy klaar vir hulle vertel het wat hy gesien het, lyk Ron ontsteld, maar Hermione is duidelik doodbang.
"Maar dit was veronderstel om op te hou! Jou litteken – dit was nie veronderstel om dit meer te doen nie! Jy moenie dat daardie verbintenis weer oopgaan nie – Dumbledore wou hê jy moet jou verstand afsluit!"
Toe hy nie antwoord nie gryp sy sy arm.
"Harry, hy neem die Ministerie oor en die koerante en die helfte van die towerwêreld! Moenie hom in jou kop ook toelaat nie!"

CHAPTER SIX



THE GHOUL IN PAJAMAS

The shock of losing Mad-Eye hung over the house in the days that followed; Harry kept expecting to see him stumping in through the back door like the other Order members, who passed in and out to relay news. Harry felt that nothing but action would assuage his feelings of guilt and grief and that he ought to set out on his mission to find and destroy Horcruxes as soon as possible.

"Well, you can't do anything about the" — Ron mouthed the word *Horcruxes* — "till you're seventeen. You've still got the Trace on you. And we can plan here as well as anywhere, can't we? Or," he dropped his voice to a whisper, "d'you reckon you already know where the You-Know-Whats are?"

"No," Harry admitted.

"I think Hermione's been doing a bit of research," said Ron. "She said she was saving it for when you got here."

They were sitting at the breakfast table; Mr. Weasley and Bill had just left for work. Mrs. Weasley had gone upstairs to wake Hermione and Ginny, while Fleur had drifted off to take a bath.

"The Trace'll break on the thirty-first," said Harry. "That means I only need to stay here four days. Then I can —"

"Five days," Ron corrected him firmly. "We've got to stay for the wedding. They'll kill us if we miss it."

Harry understood "they" to mean Fleur and Mrs. Weasley.

"It's one extra day," said Ron, when Harry looked mutinous.

"Don't they realize how important — ?"

"'Course they don't," said Ron. "They haven't got a clue. And now you mention it, I wanted to talk to you about that."

Ron glanced toward the door into the hall to check that Mrs. Weasley was not returning yet, then leaned in closer to Harry.

"Mum's been trying to get it out of Hermione and me. What we're off to do. She'll try you next, so brace yourself. Dad and Lupin've both asked as well, but when we said Dumbledore told you not to tell anyone except us, they dropped it. Not Mum, though. She's determined."

Ron's prediction came true within hours. Shortly before lunch, Mrs. Weasley detached Harry from the others by asking him to help identify a lone man's sock that she thought might have come out of his rucksack. Once she had him cornered in the tiny scullery off the kitchen, she started.

"Ron and Hermione seem to think that the three of you are dropping out of Hogwarts," she began in a light, casual tone.

"Oh," said Harry. "Well, yeah. We are."

The mangle turned of its own accord in a corner, wringing out what looked like one of Mr. Weasley's vests.

"May I ask *why* you are abandoning your education?" said Mrs. Weasley.

"Well, Dumbledore left me . . . stuff to do," mumbled Harry. "Ron and Hermione know about it, and they want to come too."

"What sort of 'stuff'?"

"I'm sorry, I can't —"

"Well, frankly, I think Arthur and I have a right to know, and I'm sure Mr. and Mrs. Granger would agree!" said Mrs. Weasley. Harry had been afraid of the "concerned parent" attack. He forced himself to look directly into her eyes, noticing as he did so that they were precisely the same shade of brown as Ginny's. This did not help.

"Dumbledore didn't want anyone else to know, Mrs. Weasley. I'm sorry. Ron and Hermione don't have to come, it's their choice —"

"I don't see that *you* have to go either!" she snapped, dropping all pretense now. "You're barely of age, any of you! It's utter nonsense, if Dumbledore needed work doing, he had the whole Order at his command! Harry, you must have misunderstood him. Probably he was telling you something he *wanted* done, and you took it to mean that he wanted *you* —"

"I didn't misunderstand," said Harry flatly. "It's got to be me."

He handed her back the single sock he was supposed to be identifying, which was patterned with golden bulrushes.

“And that’s not mine, I don’t support Puddlemere United.”

“Oh, of course not,” said Mrs. Weasley with a sudden and rather unnerving return to her casual tone. “I should have realized. Well, Harry, while we’ve still got you here, you won’t mind helping with the preparations for Bill and Fleur’s wedding, will you? There’s still so much to do.”

“No — I — of course not,” said Harry, disconcerted by this sudden change of subject.

“Sweet of you,” she replied, and she smiled as she left the scullery.

From that moment on, Mrs. Weasley kept Harry, Ron, and Hermione so busy with preparations for the wedding that they hardly had any time to think. The kindest explanation of this behavior would have been that Mrs. Weasley wanted to distract them all from thoughts of Mad-Eye and the terrors of their recent journey. After two days of nonstop cutlery cleaning, of color-matching favors, ribbons, and flowers, of de-gnoming the garden and helping Mrs. Weasley cook vast batches of canapés, however, Harry started to suspect her of a different motive. All the jobs she handed out seemed to keep him, Ron, and Hermione away from one another; he had not had a chance to speak to the two of them alone since the first night, when he had told them about Voldemort torturing Ollivander.

“I think Mum thinks that if she can stop the three of you getting together and planning, she’ll be able to delay you leaving,” Ginny told Harry in an undertone, as they laid the table for dinner on the third night of his stay.

“And then what does she think’s going to happen?” Harry muttered.

"Someone else might kill off Voldemort while she's holding us here making vol-au-vents?"

He had spoken without thinking, and saw Ginny's face whiten.

"So it's true?" she said. "That's what you're trying to do?"

"I — not — I was joking," said Harry evasively.

They stared at each other, and there was something more than shock in Ginny's expression. Suddenly Harry became aware that this was the first time that he had been alone with her since those stolen hours in secluded corners of the Hogwarts grounds. He was sure she was remembering them too. Both of them jumped as the door opened, and Mr. Weasley, Kingsley, and Bill walked in.

They were often joined by other Order members for dinner now, because the Burrow had replaced number twelve, Grimmauld Place as the headquarters. Mr. Weasley had explained that after the death of Dumbledore, their Secret-Keeper, each of the people to whom Dumbledore had confided Grimmauld Place's location had become a Secret-Keeper in turn.

"And as there are around twenty of us, that greatly dilutes the power of the Fidelius Charm. Twenty times as many opportunities for the Death Eaters to get the secret out of somebody. We can't expect it to hold much longer."

"But surely Snape will have told the Death Eaters the address by now?" asked Harry.

"Well, Mad-Eye set up a couple of curses against Snape in case he turns up there again. We hope they'll be strong enough both to keep him out and to bind his tongue if he tries to talk about the place, but we can't be sure. It would have been insane to keep using the place

as headquarters now that its protection has become so shaky."

The kitchen was so crowded that evening it was difficult to maneuver knives and forks. Harry found himself crammed beside Ginny; the unsaid things that had just passed between them made him wish they had been separated by a few more people. He was trying so hard to avoid brushing her arm he could barely cut his chicken.

"No news about Mad-Eye?" Harry asked Bill.

"Nothing," replied Bill.

They had not been able to hold a funeral for Moody, because Bill and Lupin had failed to recover his body. It had been difficult to know where he might have fallen, given the darkness and the confusion of the battle.

"The *Daily Prophet* hasn't said a word about him dying or about finding the body," Bill went on. "But that doesn't mean much. It's keeping a lot quiet these days."

"And they still haven't called a hearing about all the underage magic I used escaping the Death Eaters?" Harry called across the table to Mr. Weasley, who shook his head.

"Because they know I had no choice or because they don't want me to tell the world Voldemort attacked me?"

"The latter, I think. Scrimgeour doesn't want to admit that You-Know-Who is as powerful as he is, nor that Azkaban's seen a mass breakout."

"Yeah, why tell the public the truth?" said Harry, clenching his knife so tightly that the faint scars on the back of his right hand stood out, white against his skin: *I must not tell lies*.

"Isn't anyone at the Ministry prepared to stand up to him?" asked

Ron angrily.

"Of course, Ron, but people are terrified," Mr. Weasley replied, "terrified that they will be next to disappear, their children the next to be attacked! There are nasty rumors going around; I for one don't believe the Muggle Studies professor at Hogwarts resigned. She hasn't been seen for weeks now. Meanwhile Scrimgeour remains shut up in his office all day: I just hope he's working on a plan."

There was a pause in which Mrs. Weasley magicked the empty plates onto the work surface and served apple tart.

"We must decide 'ow you will be disguised, 'Arry," said Fleur, once everyone had pudding. "For ze wedding," she added, when he looked confused. "Of course, none of our guests are Death Eaters, but we cannot guarantee zat zey will not let something slip after zey 'ave 'ad champagne."

From this, Harry gathered that she still suspected Hagrid.

"Yes, good point," said Mrs. Weasley from the top of the table, where she sat, spectacles perched on the end of her nose, scanning an immense list of jobs that she had scribbled on a very long piece of parchment. "Now, Ron, have you cleaned out your room yet?"

"Why?" exclaimed Ron, slamming his spoon down and glaring at his mother. "Why does my room have to be cleaned out? Harry and I are fine with it the way it is!"

"We are holding your brother's wedding here in a few days' time, young man —"

"And are they getting married in my bedroom?" asked Ron furiously. "No! So why in the name of Merlin's saggy left —"

"Don't talk to your mother like that," said Mr. Weasley firmly.

“And do as you’re told.”

Ron scowled at both his parents, then picked up his spoon and attacked the last few mouthfuls of his apple tart.

“I can help, some of it’s my mess,” Harry told Ron, but Mrs. Weasley cut across him.

“No, Harry, dear, I’d much rather you helped Arthur muck out the chickens, and Hermione, I’d be ever so grateful if you’d change the sheets for Monsieur and Madame Delacour; you know they’re arriving at eleven tomorrow morning.”

But as it turned out, there was very little to do for the chickens.

“There’s no need to, er, mention it to Molly,” Mr. Weasley told Harry, blocking his access to the coop, “but, er, Ted Tonks sent me most of what was left of Sirius’s bike and, er, I’m hiding — that’s to say, keeping — it in here. Fantastic stuff: There’s an exhaust gaskin, as I believe it’s called, the most magnificent battery, and it’ll be a great opportunity to find out how brakes work. I’m going to try and put it all back together again when Molly’s not — I mean, when I’ve got time.”

When they returned to the house, Mrs. Weasley was nowhere to be seen, so Harry slipped upstairs to Ron’s attic bedroom.

“I’m doing it, I’m doing — ! Oh, it’s you,” said Ron in relief, as Harry entered the room. Ron lay back down on the bed, which he had evidently just vacated. The room was just as messy as it had been all week; the only change was that Hermione was now sitting in the far corner, her fluffy ginger cat, Crookshanks, at her feet, sorting books, some of which Harry recognized as his own, into two enormous piles.

“Hi, Harry,” she said, as he sat down on his camp bed.

“And how did you manage to get away?”

“Oh, Ron’s mum forgot that she asked Ginny and me to change the sheets yesterday,” said Hermione. She threw *Numerology and Grammatica* onto one pile and *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* onto the other.

“We were just talking about Mad-Eye,” Ron told Harry. “I reckon he might have survived.”

“But Bill saw him hit by the Killing Curse,” said Harry.

“Yeah, but Bill was under attack too,” said Ron. “How can he be sure what he saw?”

“Even if the Killing Curse missed, Mad-Eye still fell about a thousand feet,” said Hermione, now weighing *Quidditch Teams of Britain and Ireland* in her hand.

“He could have used a Shield Charm —”

“Fleur said his wand was blasted out of his hand,” said Harry.

“Well, all right, if you want him to be dead,” said Ron grumpily, punching his pillow into a more comfortable shape.

“Of course we don’t want him to be dead!” said Hermione, looking shocked. “It’s dreadful that he’s dead! But we’re being realistic!”

For the first time, Harry imagined Mad-Eye’s body, broken as Dumbledore’s had been, yet with that one eye still whizzing in its socket. He felt a stab of revulsion mixed with a bizarre desire to laugh.

“The Death Eaters probably tidied up after themselves, that’s why no one’s found him,” said Ron wisely.

"Yeah," said Harry. "Like Barty Crouch, turned into a bone and buried in Hagrid's front garden. They probably transfigured Moody and stuffed him —"

"Don't!" squealed Hermione. Startled, Harry looked over just in time to see her burst into tears over her copy of *Spellman's Syllabary*.

"Oh no," said Harry, struggling to get up from the old camp bed. "Hermione, I wasn't trying to upset —"

But with a great creaking of rusty bedsprings, Ron bounded off the bed and got there first. One arm around Hermione, he fished in his jeans pocket and withdrew a revolting-looking handkerchief that he had used to clean out the oven earlier. Hastily pulling out his wand, he pointed it at the rag and said, "*Tergeo.*"

The wand siphoned off most of the grease. Looking rather pleased with himself, Ron handed the slightly smoking handkerchief to Hermione.

"Oh . . . thanks, Ron. . . . I'm sorry. . . ." She blew her nose and hiccuped. "It's just so awf-ful, isn't it? R-right after Dumbledore . . . I j-just n-never imagined Mad-Eye dying, somehow, he seemed so tough!"

"Yeah, I know," said Ron, giving her a squeeze. "But you know what he'd say to us if he was here?"

"'C-constant vigilance,'" said Hermione, mopping her eyes.

"That's right," said Ron, nodding. "He'd tell us to learn from what happened to him. And what I've learned is not to trust that cowardly little squit, Mundungus."

Hermione gave a shaky laugh and leaned forward to pick up two

more books. A second later, Ron had snatched his arm back from around her shoulders; she had dropped *The Monster Book of Monsters* on his foot. The book had broken free from its restraining belt and snapped viciously at Ron's ankle.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Hermione cried as Harry wrenched the book from Ron's leg and retied it shut.

"What are you doing with all those books anyway?" Ron asked, limping back to his bed.

"Just trying to decide which ones to take with us," said Hermione. "When we're looking for the Horcruxes."

"Oh, of course," said Ron, clapping a hand to his forehead. "I forgot we'll be hunting down Voldemort in a mobile library."

"Ha ha," said Hermione, looking down at *Spellman's Syllabary*. "I wonder . . . will we need to translate runes? It's possible. . . . I think we'd better take it, to be safe."

She dropped the syllabary onto the larger of the two piles and picked up *Hogwarts: A History*.

"Listen," said Harry.

He had sat up straight. Ron and Hermione looked at him with similar mixtures of resignation and defiance.

"I know you said after Dumbledore's funeral that you wanted to come with me," Harry began.

"Here he goes," Ron said to Hermione, rolling his eyes.

"As we knew he would," she sighed, turning back to the books. "You know, I think I *will* take *Hogwarts: A History*. Even if we're not going back there, I don't think I'd feel right if I didn't have it with —"

“Listen!” said Harry again.

“No, Harry, *you* listen,” said Hermione. “We’re coming with you. That was decided months ago — years, really.”

“But —”

“Shut up,” Ron advised him.

“— are you sure you’ve thought this through?” Harry persisted.

“Let’s see,” said Hermione, slamming *Travels with Trolls* onto the discarded pile with a rather fierce look. “I’ve been packing for days, so we’re ready to leave at a moment’s notice, which for your information has included doing some pretty difficult magic, not to mention smuggling Mad-Eye’s whole stock of Polyjuice Potion right under Ron’s mum’s nose.

“I’ve also modified my parents’ memories so that they’re convinced they’re really called Wendell and Monica Wilkins, and that their life’s ambition is to move to Australia, which they have now done. That’s to make it more difficult for Voldemort to track them down and interrogate them about me — or you, because unfortunately, I’ve told them quite a bit about you.

“Assuming I survive our hunt for the Horcruxes, I’ll find Mum and Dad and lift the enchantment. If I don’t — well, I think I’ve cast a good enough charm to keep them safe and happy. Wendell and Monica Wilkins don’t know that they’ve got a daughter, you see.”

Hermione’s eyes were swimming with tears again. Ron got back off the bed, put his arm around her once more, and frowned at Harry as though reproaching him for lack of tact. Harry could not think of anything to say, not least because it was highly unusual for Ron to be teaching anyone else tact.

"I — Hermione, I'm sorry — I didn't —"

"Didn't realize that Ron and I know perfectly well what might happen if we come with you? Well, we do. Ron, show Harry what you've done."

"Nah, he's just eaten," said Ron.

"Go on, he needs to know!"

"Oh, all right. Harry, come here."

For the second time Ron withdrew his arm from around Hermione and stumped over to the door.

"C'mon."

"Why?" Harry asked, following Ron out of the room onto the tiny landing.

"Descendo," muttered Ron, pointing his wand at the low ceiling. A hatch opened right over their heads and a ladder slid down to their feet. A horrible, half-sucking, half-moaning sound came out of the square hole, along with an unpleasant smell like open drains.

"That's your ghoul, isn't it?" asked Harry, who had never actually met the creature that sometimes disrupted the nightly silence.

"Yeah, it is," said Ron, climbing the ladder. "Come and have a look at him."

Harry followed Ron up the few short steps into the tiny attic space. His head and shoulders were in the room before he caught sight of the creature curled up a few feet from him, fast asleep in the gloom with its large mouth wide open.

"But it . . . it looks . . . do ghouls normally wear pajamas?"

"No," said Ron. "Nor have they usually got red hair or that number of pustules."

Harry contemplated the thing, slightly revolted. It was human in shape and size, and was wearing what, now that Harry's eyes became used to the darkness, was clearly an old pair of Ron's pajamas. He was also sure that ghouls were generally rather slimy and bald, rather than distinctly hairy and covered in angry purple blisters.

"He's me, see?" said Ron.

"No," said Harry. "I don't."

"I'll explain it back in my room, the smell's getting to me," said Ron. They climbed back down the ladder, which Ron returned to the ceiling, and rejoined Hermione, who was still sorting books.

"Once we've left, the ghoul's going to come and live down here in my room," said Ron. "I think he's really looking forward to it — well, it's hard to tell, because all he can do is moan and drool — but he nods a lot when you mention it. Anyway, he's going to be me with spattergroit. Good, eh?"

Harry merely looked his confusion.

"It is!" said Ron, clearly frustrated that Harry had not grasped the brilliance of the plan. "Look, when we three don't turn up at Hogwarts again, everyone's going to think Hermione and I must be with you, right? Which means the Death Eaters will go straight for our families to see if they've got information on where you are."

"But hopefully it'll look like I've gone away with Mum and Dad; a lot of Muggle-borns are talking about going into hiding at the moment," said Hermione.

"We can't hide my whole family, it'll look too fishy and they can't all leave their jobs," said Ron. "So we're going to put out the story that I'm seriously ill with spattergroit, which is why I can't go back

to school. If anyone comes calling to investigate, Mum or Dad can show them the ghoul in my bed, covered in pustules. Spattergroit's really contagious, so they're not going to want to go near him. It won't matter that he can't say anything, either, because apparently you can't once the fungus has spread to your uvula."

"And your mum and dad are in on this plan?" asked Harry.

"Dad is. He helped Fred and George transform the ghoul. Mum . . . well, you've seen what she's like. She won't accept we're going till we've gone."

There was silence in the room, broken only by gentle thuds as Hermione continued to throw books onto one pile or the other. Ron sat watching her, and Harry looked from one to the other, unable to say anything. The measures they had taken to protect their families made him realize, more than anything else could have done, that they really were going to come with him and that they knew exactly how dangerous that would be. He wanted to tell them what that meant to him, but he simply could not find words important enough.

Through the silence came the muffled sounds of Mrs. Weasley shouting from four floors below.

"Ginny's probably left a speck of dust on a poxy napkin ring," said Ron. "I dunno why the Delacours have got to come two days before the wedding."

"Fleur's sister's a bridesmaid, she needs to be here for the rehearsal, and she's too young to come on her own," said Hermione, as she pored indecisively over *Break with a Banshee*.

"Well, guests aren't going to help Mum's stress levels," said Ron.

"What we really need to decide," said Hermione, tossing

Defensive Magical Theory into the bin without a second glance and picking up *An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe*, "is where we're going after we leave here. I know you said you wanted to go to Godric's Hollow first, Harry, and I understand why, but . . . well . . . shouldn't we make the Horcruxes our priority?"

"If we knew where any of the Horcruxes were, I'd agree with you," said Harry, who did not believe that Hermione really understood his desire to return to Godric's Hollow. His parents' graves were only part of the attraction: He had a strong, though inexplicable, feeling that the place held answers for him. Perhaps it was simply because it was there that he had survived Voldemort's Killing Curse; now that he was facing the challenge of repeating the feat, Harry was drawn to the place where it had happened, wanting to understand.

"Don't you think there's a possibility that Voldemort's keeping a watch on Godric's Hollow?" Hermione asked. "He might expect you to go back and visit your parents' graves once you're free to go wherever you like?"

This had not occurred to Harry. While he struggled to find a counterargument, Ron spoke up, evidently following his own train of thought.

"This R.A.B. person," he said. "You know, the one who stole the real locket?"

Hermione nodded.

"He said in his note he was going to destroy it, didn't he?"

Harry dragged his rucksack toward him and pulled out the fake Horcrux in which R.A.B.'s note was still folded.

"'I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can,'" Harry read out.

"Well, what if he *did* finish it off?" said Ron.

"Or she," interposed Hermione.

"Whichever," said Ron, "it'd be one less for us to do!"

"Yes, but we're still going to have to try and trace the real locket, aren't we?" said Hermione, "to find out whether or not it's destroyed."

"And once we get hold of it, how *do* you destroy a Horcrux?" asked Ron.

"Well," said Hermione, "I've been researching that."

"How?" asked Harry. "I didn't think there were any books on Horcruxes in the library?"

"There weren't," said Hermione, who had turned pink. "Dumbledore removed them all, but he — he didn't destroy them."

Ron sat up straight, wide-eyed.

"How in the name of Merlin's pants have you managed to get your hands on those Horcrux books?"

"It — it wasn't stealing!" said Hermione, looking from Harry to Ron with a kind of desperation. "They were still library books, even if Dumbledore had taken them off the shelves. Anyway, if he *really* didn't want anyone to get at them, I'm sure he would have made it much harder to —"

"Get to the point!" said Ron.

"Well . . . it was easy," said Hermione in a small voice. "I just did a Summoning Charm. You know — Accio. And — they zoomed out of Dumbledore's study window right into the girls' dormitory."

"But when did you do this?" Harry asked, regarding Hermione with a mixture of admiration and incredulity.

"Just after his — Dumbledore's — funeral," said Hermione in an even smaller voice. "Right after we agreed we'd leave school and go and look for the Horcruxes. When I went back upstairs to get my things it — it just occurred to me that the more we knew about them, the better it would be . . . and I was alone in there . . . so I tried . . . and it worked. They flew straight in through the open window and I — I packed them."

She swallowed and then said imploringly, "I can't believe Dumbledore would have been angry, it's not as though we're going to use the information to make a Horcrux, is it?"

"Can you hear us complaining?" said Ron. "Where are these books anyway?"

Hermione rummaged for a moment and then extracted from the pile a large volume, bound in faded black leather. She looked a little nauseated and held it as gingerly as if it were something recently dead.

"This is the one that gives explicit instructions on how to make a Horcrux. *Secrets of the Darkest Art* — it's a horrible book, really awful, full of evil magic. I wonder when Dumbledore removed it from the library. . . . If he didn't do it until he was headmaster, I bet Voldemort got all the instruction he needed from here."

"Why did he have to ask Slughorn how to make a Horcrux, then, if he'd already read that?" asked Ron.

"He only approached Slughorn to find out what would happen if you split your soul into seven," said Harry. "Dumbledore was sure

Riddle already knew how to make a Horcrux by the time he asked Slughorn about them. I think you're right, Hermione, that could easily have been where he got the information."

"And the more I've read about them," said Hermione, "the more horrible they seem, and the less I can believe that he actually made six. It warns in this book how unstable you make the rest of your soul by ripping it, and that's just by making one Horcrux!"

Harry remembered what Dumbledore had said about Voldemort moving beyond "usual evil."

"Isn't there any way of putting yourself back together?" Ron asked.

"Yes," said Hermione with a hollow smile, "but it would be excruciatingly painful."

"Why? How do you do it?" asked Harry.

"Remorse," said Hermione. "You've got to really feel what you've done. There's a footnote. Apparently the pain of it can destroy you. I can't see Voldemort attempting it somehow, can you?"

"No," said Ron, before Harry could answer. "So does it say how to destroy Horcruxes in that book?"

"Yes," said Hermione, now turning the fragile pages as if examining rotting entrails, "because it warns Dark wizards how strong they have to make the enchantments on them. From all that I've read, what Harry did to Riddle's diary was one of the few really foolproof ways of destroying a Horcrux."

"What, stabbing it with a basilisk fang?" asked Harry.

"Oh well, lucky we've got such a large supply of basilisk fangs, then," said Ron. "I was wondering what we were going to do with them."

"It doesn't have to be a basilisk fang," said Hermione patiently. "It has to be something so destructive that the Horcrux can't repair itself. Basilisk venom only has one antidote, and it's incredibly rare —"

"— phoenix tears," said Harry, nodding.

"Exactly," said Hermione. "Our problem is that there are very few substances as destructive as basilisk venom, and they're all dangerous to carry around with you. That's a problem we're going to have to solve, though, because ripping, smashing, or crushing a Horcrux won't do the trick. You've got to put it beyond magical repair."

"But even if we wreck the thing it lives in," said Ron, "why can't the bit of soul in it just go and live in something else?"

"Because a Horcrux is the complete opposite of a human being."

Seeing that Harry and Ron looked thoroughly confused, Hermione hurried on, "Look, if I picked up a sword right now, Ron, and ran you through with it, I wouldn't damage your soul at all."

"Which would be a real comfort to me, I'm sure," said Ron. Harry laughed.

"It should be, actually! But my point is that whatever happens to your body, your soul will survive, untouched," said Hermione. "But it's the other way round with a Horcrux. The fragment of soul inside it depends on its container, its enchanted body, for survival. It can't exist without it."

"That diary sort of died when I stabbed it," said Harry, remembering ink pouring like blood from the punctured pages, and the screams of the piece of Voldemort's soul as it vanished.

"And once the diary was properly destroyed, the bit of soul

trapped in it could no longer exist. Ginny tried to get rid of the diary before you did, flushing it away, but obviously it came back good as new."

"Hang on," said Ron, frowning. "The bit of soul in that diary was possessing Ginny, wasn't it? How does that work, then?"

"While the magical container is still intact, the bit of soul inside it can flit in and out of someone if they get too close to the object. I don't mean holding it for too long, it's nothing to do with touching it," she added before Ron could speak. "I mean close emotionally. Ginny poured her heart out into that diary, she made herself incredibly vulnerable. You're in trouble if you get too fond of or dependent on the Horcrux."

"I wonder how Dumbledore destroyed the ring?" said Harry. "Why didn't I ask him? I never really . . ."

His voice tailed away: He was thinking of all the things he should have asked Dumbledore, and of how, since the headmaster had died, it seemed to Harry that he had wasted so many opportunities when Dumbledore had been alive, to find out more . . . to find out everything. . . .

The silence was shattered as the bedroom door flew open with a wall-shaking crash. Hermione shrieked and dropped *Secrets of the Darkest Art*; Crookshanks streaked under the bed, hissing indignantly; Ron jumped off the bed, skidded on a discarded Chocolate Frog wrapper, and smacked his head on the opposite wall; and Harry instinctively dived for his wand before realizing that he was looking up at Mrs. Weasley, whose hair was disheveled and whose face was contorted with rage.

"I'm so sorry to break up this cozy little gathering," she said, her voice trembling. "I'm sure you all need your rest . . . but there are wedding presents stacked in my room that need sorting out and I was under the impression that you had agreed to help."

"Oh yes," said Hermione, looking terrified as she leapt to her feet, sending books flying in every direction, "we will . . . we're sorry . . ."

With an anguished look at Harry and Ron, Hermione hurried out of the room after Mrs. Weasley.

"It's like being a house-elf," complained Ron in an undertone, still massaging his head as he and Harry followed. "Except without the job satisfaction. The sooner this wedding's over, the happier I'll be."

"Yeah," said Harry, "then we'll have nothing to do except find Horcruxes. . . . It'll be like a holiday, won't it?"

Ron started to laugh, but at the sight of the enormous pile of wedding presents waiting for them in Mrs. Weasley's room, stopped quite abruptly.

The Delacours arrived the following morning at eleven o'clock. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were feeling quite resentful toward Fleur's family by this time, and it was with ill grace that Ron stumped back upstairs to put on matching socks, and Harry attempted to flatten his hair. Once they had all been deemed smart enough, they trooped out into the sunny backyard to await the visitors.

Harry had never seen the place looking so tidy. The rusty cauldrons and old Wellington boots that usually littered the steps by the back door were gone, replaced by two new Flutterby bushes standing either side of the door in large pots; though there was no

breeze, the leaves waved lazily, giving an attractive rippling effect. The chickens had been shut away, the yard had been swept, and the nearby garden had been pruned, plucked, and generally spruced up, although Harry, who liked it in its overgrown state, thought that it looked rather forlorn without its usual contingent of capering gnomes.

He had lost track of how many security enchantments had been placed upon the Burrow by both the Order and the Ministry; all he knew was that it was no longer possible for anybody to travel by magic directly into the place. Mr. Weasley had therefore gone to meet the Delacours on top of a nearby hill, where they were to arrive by Portkey. The first sound of their approach was an unusually high-pitched laugh, which turned out to be coming from Mr. Weasley, who appeared at the gate moments later, laden with luggage and leading a beautiful blonde woman in long, leaf-green robes, who could only be Fleur's mother.

"Maman!" cried Fleur, rushing forward to embrace her. "Papa!"

Monsieur Delacour was nowhere near as attractive as his wife; he was a head shorter and extremely plump, with a little, pointed black beard. However, he looked good-natured. Bouncing toward Mrs. Weasley on high-heeled boots, he kissed her twice on each cheek, leaving her flustered.

"You 'ave been to much trouble," he said in a deep voice. "Fleur tells us you 'ave been working very 'ard."

"Oh, it's been nothing, nothing!" trilled Mrs. Weasley. "No trouble at all!"

Ron relieved his feelings by aiming a kick at a gnome who was peering out from behind one of the new Flutterby bushes.

"Dear lady!" said Monsieur Delacour, still holding Mrs. Weasley's hand between his own two plump ones and beaming. "We are most honored at the approaching union of our two families! Let me present my wife, Apolline."

Madame Delacour glided forward and stooped to kiss Mrs. Weasley too.

"Enchantée," she said. "Your 'usband 'as been telling us such amusing stories!"

Mr. Weasley gave a maniacal laugh; Mrs. Weasley threw him a look, upon which he became immediately silent and assumed an expression appropriate to the sickbed of a close friend.

"And, of course, you 'ave met my leetle daughter, Gabrielle!" said Monsieur Delacour. Gabrielle was Fleur in miniature; eleven years old, with waist-length hair of pure, silvery blonde, she gave Mrs. Weasley a dazzling smile and hugged her, then threw Harry a glowing look, batting her eyelashes. Ginny cleared her throat loudly.

"Well, come in, do!" said Mrs. Weasley brightly, and she ushered the Delacours into the house, with many "No, please!"s and "After you!"s and "Not at all!"s.

The Delacours, it soon transpired, were helpful, pleasant guests. They were pleased with everything and keen to assist with the preparations for the wedding. Monsieur Delacour pronounced everything from the seating plan to the bridesmaids' shoes *"Charmant!"* Madame Delacour was most accomplished at household spells and had the oven properly cleaned in a trice; Gabrielle followed her elder sister around, trying to assist in any way she could and jabbering away in rapid French.

On the downside, the Burrow was not built to accommodate so many people. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were now sleeping in the sitting room, having shouted down Monsieur and Madame Delacour's protests and insisted they take their bedroom. Gabrielle was sleeping with Fleur in Percy's old room, and Bill would be sharing with Charlie, his best man, once Charlie arrived from Romania. Opportunities to make plans together became virtually nonexistent, and it was in desperation that Harry, Ron, and Hermione took to volunteering to feed the chickens just to escape the overcrowded house.

"But she *still* won't leave us alone!" snarled Ron, as their second attempt at a meeting in the yard was foiled by the appearance of Mrs. Weasley carrying a large basket of laundry in her arms.

"Oh, good, you've fed the chickens," she called as she approached them. "We'd better shut them away again before the men arrive tomorrow . . . to put up the tent for the wedding," she explained, pausing to lean against the henhouse. She looked exhausted. "Millamant's Magic Marquees . . . they're very good, Bill's escorting them. . . . You'd better stay inside while they're here, Harry. I must say it does complicate organizing a wedding, having all these security spells around the place."

"I'm sorry," said Harry humbly.

"Oh, don't be silly, dear!" said Mrs. Weasley at once. "I didn't mean — well, your safety's much more important! Actually, I've been wanting to ask you how you want to celebrate your birthday, Harry. Seventeen, after all, it's an important day. . . ."

"I don't want a fuss," said Harry quickly, envisaging the additional

strain this would put on them all. "Really, Mrs. Weasley, just a normal dinner would be fine. . . . It's the day before the wedding. . . ."

"Oh, well, if you're sure, dear. I'll invite Remus and Tonks, shall I? And how about Hagrid?"

"That'd be great," said Harry. "But please don't go to loads of trouble."

"Not at all, not at all . . . It's no trouble. . . ."

She looked at him, a long, searching look, then smiled a little sadly, straightened up, and walked away. Harry watched as she waved her wand near the washing line, and the damp clothes rose into the air to hang themselves up, and suddenly he felt a great wave of remorse for the inconvenience and the pain he was giving her.

— HOOFSTUK SES —

Die Huismonster in Pajamas

Die skok om Maloog te verloor hang in die daaropvolgende dae oor die huis; Harry verwag steeds dat hy, soos die ander lede van die Orde wat in- en uitkom om nuus te bring, by die agterdeur gaan instap. Harry voel slegs aksie sal sy skuldgevoelens en hartseer verlig en wil so gou moontlik vertrek op sy sending om die Horcruxe te kry en te vernietig.

"Wel, jy kan niks doen omtrent die –" Ron vorm die woord *Horcruxe* met sy mond, "tot jy sewentien is nie. Die Spoor is nog steeds op jou. En ons kan hier net so goed as enige ander plek planne maak, dink jy nie? Of," hy laat val sy stem tot 'n fluistering, "dink jy dalk jy weet al klaar waar die jy-weet-wats is?"

"Nee," erken Harry.

"Ek dink Hermione het 'n bietjie navorsing gedoen," sê Ron. "Sy't gesê sy hou dit vir wanneer jy hier aankom."

Hulle sit aan die ontbyttafel; meneer Weasley en Bill is so pas weg werk toe, mevrou Weasley is boontoe om Hermione en Ginny wakker te maak, terwyl Fleur verdwyn het om te gaan bad.

"Die Spoor word op die een-en-dertigste opgehef," sê Harry. "Dit beteken ek hoef net vier dae hier te bly. Dan kan ek –"

"Vyf dae," help Ron hom streng reg. "Ons moet hier bly vir die troue. Hulle maak ons dood as ons dit mis."

Harry verstaan "hulle" verwys na Fleur en mevrou Weasley.

"Dis een ekstra dag," sê Ron toe Harry opstandig lyk.

"Besef hulle nie hoe belangrik –?"

"Natuurlik nie," sê Ron. "Hulle het nie 'n idee nie. En noudat jy dit noem, ek wou met jou daaroor gepraat het."

Ron loer deur toe en by die portaal in om seker te maak mevrou Weasley kom nog nie terug nie, dan leun hy nader aan Harry.

"Ma probeer heeltyd om dit uit my en Hermione te trek, wat ons wil gaan doen. Sy gaan jou ook uitvra, so maak jou reg daarvoor. Pa en Lupin het al twee ook al gevra, maar toe ons sê Dumbledore het

gesê jy mag vir niemand behalwe ons vertel nie, het hulle dit gelos. Maar nie Ma nie. Sy's vasberade."

Ron se voorspelling word binne 'n paar uur waar. Kort voor middagete kry mevrou Weasley Harry by die ander weg deur hom te vra om 'n sokkie sonder maat wat sy meen dalk uit sy rugsak kom, te help identifiseer. Toe sy hom eers in die klein waskamertjie langs die kombuis vasgekeer het, begin sy.

"Ron en Hermione dink blykbaar julle drie gaan nie klaarmaak by Hogwarts nie," begin sy in 'n ligte, ongeërgde stemtoon.

"O," sê Harry. "Wel, ja. Ons gaan nie."

Die roller draai op sy eie in 'n hoek en wring iets wat soos een van meneer Weasley se onderhemde lyk.

"Mag ek vra *hoekom* julle jul opvoeding gaan staak?" vra mevrou Weasley.

"Wel, Dumbledore het vir my . . . goed gegee om te doen," mompel Harry. "Ron en Hermione weet daarvan, en hulle wil saamkom."

"Watter soort 'goed'?"

"Ek's jammer, ek kan nie –"

"Wel, ek dink regtig ek en Arthur het 'n reg om te weet, en ek is seker meneer en mevrou Granger sal saamstem!" sê mevrou Weasley. Harry was bang vir die "besorgde ouers"-aanval. Hy dwing homself om reguit in haar oë te kyk en sien dan hulle is presies dieselfde skakering bruin as Ginny s'n. Dit help nie.

"Dumbledore wou nie hê enigiemand anders moet weet nie, mevrou Weasley. Ek's jammer. Ron en Hermione hoef nie te kom nie; dis hulle keuse –"

"Ek sien net so min hoekom *jy* moet gaan!" snou sy hom toe en laat vaar nou alle geveinsheid. "Julle is skaars mondig, almal van julle! Dis louter snert! As Dumbledore werk gehad het wat gedoen moes word, was die hele Orde tot sy beskikking! Harry, jy moet hom verkeerd verstaan het. Hy het heel moontlik vir jou vertel van iets wat hy gedoen wou hê, en toe neem jy dit op asof hy wou hê *jy* moet –"

"Ek het nie verkeerd verstaan nie," sê Harry botweg. "Dit moet ek wees."

Hy gee die sokkie wat hy veronderstel was om te identifiseer vir haar terug; dit het 'n goue palmietpatroon op.

"En dis nie myne nie. Ek ondersteun nie vir Puddlemere United nie."

"O, natuurlik nie," sê mevrou Weasley met 'n skielike en effens onheilspellende terugkeer na haar ongeërgde stemtoon. "Ek moes geweet het. Wel, Harry, aangesien ons jou nou nog hier het, sal jy

seker nie omgee om met die voorbereidings vir Bill en Fleur se troue te help nie, nè? Daar is nog soveel om te doen."

"Nee – ek – natuurlik nie," sê Harry, van stryk af gebring deur hierdie skielike verandering van onderwerp.

"Lief van jou," antwoord sy en glimlag toe sy by die waskamer uitgaan.

Van daardie oomblik af hou mevrou Weasley Harry, Ron en Hermione so besig met voorbereidings vir die troue dat hulle skaars tyd het om te dink. Die vriendelikste verduideliking van hierdie gedrag sou wees dat mevrou Weasley hulle aandag wil aflei van alle gedagtes aan Maloog en die verskrikking van hulle onlangse reis. Ná twee dae van nimmereindigende messegoed skoonmaak, van kleurkoördinering van geskenkies vir gaste, linte en blomme, van ontslae raak van aardmannetjies in die tuin en mevrou Weasley help om ontsaglike hoeveelhede kanapees te bak, begin Harry haar egter van 'n ander motief verdink. Al die take wat sy uitdeel, hou hom, Ron en Hermione van mekaar af weg; hy het nog nie kans gehad om alleen met hulle twee te gesels ná die eerste aand toe hy hulle vertel het hoe Voldemort Ollivander gemartel het nie.

"Ek dink Ma dink as sy kan keer dat julle drie bymekaar kom en planne beraam, sal sy julle langer hier kan hou," sê Ginny op die derde dag van sy verblyf onderlangs vir Harry terwyl hulle die tafel vir aandete dek.

"En wat dink sy gaan dan gebeur?" brom Harry. "Gaan iemand anders Voldemort doodmaak terwyl sy ons hier hou om vol-au-vents te maak?"

Hy het gepraat sonder om te dink en sien Ginny se gesig word wit.

"So dis waar?" sê sy. "Dis wat jy wil probeer doen?"

"Ek – nee – ek het net 'n grap gemaak," sê Harry ontwykend.

Hulle staar na mekaar en daar is iets meer as skok in Ginny se uitdrukking. Skielik word Harry daarvan bewus dat dit die eerste keer is dat hy alleen saam met haar is sedert daardie gesteelde ure in afgeleë hoekies van Hogwarts se skoolterrein. Hy is seker sy dink ook aan hulle tye saam. Hulle albei wip van skrik toe die deur oopgaan en meneer Weasley, Kingsley en Bill inloop.

Ander lede van die Orde sluit nou dikwels by hulle aan vir aandete, want Die Konynenes het Grimmauldplein 12 as die Hoofkwartier vervang. Meneer Weasley het dit só verduidelik: ná Dumbledore, hulle Geheimhouer, se dood het elkeen van die mense aan wie Dumbledore Grimmauldplein se ligging toevertrou het op sy beurt 'n Geheimhouer geword.

"En aangesien daar ongeveer twintig van ons is, verswak dit die Fidelius-towerspreuk se krag geweldig. Dit gee die Doodseters twintig keer meer geleenthede om die geheim uit iemand te kry. Ons kan nie verwag om dit veel langer stil te hou nie."

"Maar Snape het tog sekerlik teen hierdie tyd al vir die Doodseters gesê wat die adres is?" vra Harry.

"Wel, Maloog het 'n paar paljasse teen Snape opgestel vir ingeval hy weer daar opdaag. Ons hoop hulle sal sterk genoeg wees om hom uit te hou, en ook om sy tong te knoop as hy oor die plek probeer praat, maar ons kan nie seker wees nie. Dit sal malligheid wees om die plek nog steeds as Hoofkwartier te gebruik noudat dit so moeilik geword het om dit te beskerm."

Die kombuis is dié aand so stampvol dat mense sukkel om hulle messe en vurke te gebruik. Harry Ginny sit langs ingedruk; die ongesêde dinge wat vroeër tussen hulle was, laat hom wens daar sit liewer 'n paar mense tussen hulle. Hy probeer so hard om nie teen haar arm te skuur nie dat hy sy hoender skaars kan sny.

"Niks nuus van Maloog nie?" vra Harry vir Bill.

"Niks," antwoord Bill.

Hulle kon nog nie vir Maloog 'n begrafnis hou nie, want Bill en Lupin het nog nie daarin geslaag om sy liggaam terug te kry nie. Dit is moeilik om te raai waar hy kon geval het, gegewe die donkerte en die verwarring van die geveg.

"Die *Daaglikse Profeet* het nie 'n woord gesê van hom wat dood is of van die liggaam wat gevind is nie," gaan Bill aan. "Maar dit beteken nie veel nie. Hulle hou deesdae baie dinge stil."

"En het hulle nog nie 'n verhoor belê oor al die minderjarige towerkrag wat ek gebruik het om van die Doodseters te ontsnap nie?" vra Harry oor die tafel vir meneer Weasley wat sy kop skud. "Is dit omdat hulle weet ek het nie 'n keuse gehad nie, of omdat hulle nie wil hê ek moet vir die wêreld vertel Voldemort het my aangeval nie?"

"Laasgenoemde, sou ek sê. Scrimgeour wil nie erken Jy-Weet-Wie is so magtig as wat hy is nie, en ook nie dat daar 'n massaontsnapping uit Azkaban was nie."

"Ja-nee, hoekom vir die publiek die waarheid vertel?" sê Harry en hy klem sy mes so styf vas dat die dowwe letsels agterop sy regterhand wit teen sy vel uitstaan: *Ek mag nie leuens vertel nie.*

"Is niemand by die Ministerie bereid om hom teë te gaan nie?" vra Ron kwaad.

"Natuurlik, Ron, maar mense is angsbevange," antwoord meneer Weasley, "angsbevange dat hulle volgende gaan verdwyn, dat hulle

kinders volgende aangeval gaan word! Daar doen lelike gerugte die ronde; ek glo byvoorbeeld nie Hogwarts se Moggelstudies-professor het bedank nie. Sy is nou weke laas gesien. Intussen bly Scrimgeour heeldag en aldag in sy kantoor opgesluit: ek hoop net hy werk aan 'n plan."

Daar is 'n pouse waarin mevrou Weasley die leë borde eenkant toe toor en appeltert bedien.

"Ons moet besluit 'oe om jou te vermon, 'arry," sê Fleur wanneer almal poeding het. "Vir die troue" voeg sy by toe hy verward lyk. "Ons gaan natuurlik nie Doodseters nooi nie, maar ons kan nie waarborg dat 'n gas nie iets sal laat uitglip as 'y eers sjampanje gedrink 'et nie."

Harry lei hiervan af dat sy Hagrid nog steeds verdink.

"Ja, goeie punt," sê mevrou Weasley van die kop van die tafel af waar sy sit met haar bril op die punt van haar neus terwyl haar oë afbeweeg oor 'n ellelange lys take wat sy op 'n baie lang stuk perkament neergeskryf het. "Nouja, Ron, het jy jou kamer al netjies gemaak?"

"Hoekom?" roep Ron uit en smyt sy lepel neer en gluur sy ma aan. "Hoekom moet my kamer netjies gemaak word? Ek en Harry hou daarvan soos dit is!"

"Ons hou jou broer se troue oor 'n paar dae hier, jong man –"

"En gaan hulle in my kamer trou?" vra Ron woedend. "Nee! So hoekom in die naam van Merlin se pap linker–"

"Jy praat nie so met jou ma nie," sê meneer Weasley streng. "En jy maak soos sy vir jou sê."

Ron gee albei sy ouers 'n suur kyk, tel sy lepel dan op en verslind die laaste paar monde vol van sy appeltert.

"Ek kan help; party van die goed is my gemors," sê Harry vir Ron, maar mevrou Weasley knip hom kort.

"Nee, Harry, skat, ek sal baie eerder wil hê jy moet Arthur help om die hoenderhok skoon te maak, en Hermione, ek sal oneindig dankbaar wees as jy skoon lakens vir monsieur en madame Delacour kan oortrek; jy weet mos hulle kom môreoggend elfuur hier aan."

Maar daar is toe nie veel om by die hoenders te doen nie.

"Dis nie nodig om, e, dit vir Molly te noem nie," sê meneer Weasley, wat die hoenderhok se hek toestaan, vir Harry, "maar, e, Ted Tonks het vir my die meeste stukke wat van Sirius se motorfiets oor was, gestuur en, e, en ek steek dit hier weg – ek bedoel, ek hou dit hier. Fantastiese goed: daar's 'n pakstuk, soos dit blykbaar genoem word, die heel wonderlikste battery, en dit sal 'n goeie geleentheid wees om uit te vind hoe die remme werk. Ek gaan dit alles

weer aanmekaar probeer sit wanneer Molly nie – ek bedoel, wanneer ek tyd het."

Toe hulle terug by die huis kom, is mevrou Weasley nêrens te sien nie, so Harry glip op na Ron se solderkamer.

"Ek's besig, ek's besig om –! O, dis jy," sê Ron verlig toe Harry by die kamer inkom. Ron val terug op die bed waarvandaan hy duidelik nou net opgespring het. Die kamer is nog net so morsig soos dit al heelweek is; die enigste verandering is dat Hermione nou in die verste hoek sit met haar wollerige gemmerkat, Kromskeen, by haar voete terwyl sy boeke, waarvan Harry party as syne herken, in twee enorme hope uitsorteer.

"Haai, Harry," sê sy wanneer hy op sy kampbed gaan sit.

"En hoe het jy dit reggekry om weg te kom?"

"O, Ron se ma het vergeet sy't gister al vir my en Ginny gevra om die lakens om te ruil," sê Hermione. Sy gooi *Numerologie en Grammatika* op een stapel en *Die Opkoms en Val van die Donker Kunste* op die ander een.

"Ons praat nou net oor Maloog," sê Ron vir Harry. "Ek dink hy lewe dalk nog."

"Maar Bill het gesien hoe tref die Moordvloek hom," sê Harry.

"Ja, maar Bill was ook onder skoot," sê Ron. "Hoe kan hy seker wees wat hy gesien het?"

"Selfs al was die Moordvloek mis, sou Maloog nog steeds omtrent duisend voet ver geval het," sê Hermione, wat nou *Kwiddiek, Britse en Ierse spanne* in haar hand weeg.

"Hy kon die Skildspreuk gebruik het –"

"Fleur sê sy towerstaf is uit sy hand geblaas," sê Harry.

"Wel, oukei, as julle wil hê hy moet dood wees," sê Ron nors en moker sy kussing in 'n meer gemaklike vorm.

"Natuurlik wil ons nie hê hy moet dood wees nie!" sê Hermione en lyk geskok. "Dis aaklig dat hy dood is! Maar ons is net realisties!"

Vir die eerste keer stel Harry hom Maloog se liggaam voor, so stukkend soos Dumbledore s'n was, maar met daardie een oog wat nog in sy kas woer. Hy voel 'n steek van walging gemeng met 'n bisarre begeerte om te lag.

"Die Doodseters het seker agter hulle skoongemaak; dis hoekom niemand hom kon kry nie," is Ron se gevolgtrekking.

"Ja," sê Harry. "Soos Barty Crouch wat in 'n been verander is en in Hagrid se voortuin begrawe is. Hulle het Moody seker ge-Transfigureer en hom opgestop –"

"Moenie!" gil Hermione. Harry skrik en kyk op, net betyds om

haar in trane te sien uitbars oor haar eksemplaar van *Towerspel-sillabarium.*

"Ekskuus," sê Harry en sukkel om uit die ou kampbed op te kom. "Hermione, ek wou jou nie ontstel –"

Maar Ron spring met 'n groot gekraak van geroeste bedvere op en kom eerste by haar. Met sy arm om Hermione soek hy in sy jeans se sakke rond en kry dan 'n walglike sakdoek wat hy vroeër gebruik het om die oond mee skoon te maak. Hy pluk haastig sy towerstaf uit, rig dit op die lap en sê: "*Tergeo.*"

Die towerstaf suig die meeste van die vetterigheid op. Taamlik tevrede met homself gee Ron die effens rokende sakdoek vir Hermione.

"O . . . dankie, Ron . . . Ek's jammer . . ." Sy snuit haar neus en hik. "Dis net so aak – lig. N – Net ná Dumbledore . . . Ek het n – net n – nooit kon dink Maloog kan sterf nie. Hy het altyd so taai gelyk!"

"Ja, ek weet," sê Ron en gee haar 'n drukkie. "Maar weet jy wat sou hy vir ons gesê het as hy hier was?"

" 'Wees wakker en waaksaam'," sê Hermione en vee haar oë af.

"Dis reg," sê Ron en knik. "Hy sou gesê het ons moet leer uit wat met hom gebeur het. En wat ek geleer het, is dat 'n mens nie daai lafaard van 'n Mundungus-muggie kan vertrou nie."

Hermione gee 'n bewerige laggie en leun vorentoe om nog twee boeke op te tel. 'n Sekonde later ruk Ron sy arm van haar skouers af weg; sy het *Die Monsterboek van Monsters* op sy voet laat val. Die boek het losgebreek uit die leerband wat hom bymekaar hou en hap venynig na Ron se enkel.

"Ek's jammer, ek's jammer!" roep Hermione uit terwyl Harry die boek van Ron se voet aftrek en dit weer toebind.

"Wat doen jy in elk geval met al daardie boeke?" vra Ron en hinkepink terug na sy bed toe.

"Ek probeer besluit watter om saam met ons te vat," sê Hermione. "Wanneer ons die Horcruxe gaan soek."

"O, natuurlik," sê Ron en klap sy voorkop met een hand. "Ek het vergeet ons gaan jag maak op Voldemort in 'n mobiele biblioteek."

"Ha-ha," sê Hermione en kyk af na haar *Towerspel-sillabarium.* "Ek wonder . . . sal ons runes moet vertaal? Dis moontlik . . . Ek dink ons moet dit maar veiligheidshalwe saamvat."

Sy laat val die sillabarium op die groter stapel van die twee en tel *Hogwarts: 'n Geskiedenis* op.

"Luister," sê Harry.

Hy sit regop. Ron en Hermione kyk na hom met enerse mengsels van berusting en verset.

"Ek weet julle het ná Dumbledore se begrafnis gesê julle wil saam met my kom," begin Harry.

"Hier gaan hy," sê Ron vir Hermione en rol sy oë.

"Nes ons verwag het," sug sy en draai terug na die boeke toe. "Weet julle, ek dink ek gáán *Hogwarts: 'n Geskiedenis* saamvat. Selfs al gaan ons nie terug soontoe nie, dink ek nie dit sal reg voel as ek dit nie by –"

"Luister!" sê Harry weer.

"Nee, Harry, luister *jy*," sê Hermione. "Ons kom saam met jou. Dis maande gelede al besluit – eintlik jare gelede."

"Maar –"

"Sjarrap," raai Ron hom aan.

"– is julle seker julle het goed hieroor nagedink?" hou Harry vol.

"Kom ons kyk," sê Hermione en gooi *Toer met Trolle* met 'n taamlike kwaai kyk op die weggooihoop neer. "Ek pak nou al dae lank in, sodat ons gereed is om amper oombliklik te vertrek, wat vir jou inligting 'n paar heel moeilike toorkunsies ingesluit het, om nie te praat van Maloog se hele voorraad Polisouspaljas wat ons onder Ron se ma se neus moes insmokkel nie.

"Ek het ook my ouers se geheues aangepas sodat hulle oortuig sal wees hulle name is regtig Wendell en Monica Wilkins, en dat dit hulle lewensdroom is om Australië toe te trek, wat hulle nou gedoen het. Dis om dit moeiliker vir Voldemort te maak om hulle op te spoor en te ondervra oor my – of oor jou, want ek het hulle ongelukkig nogal baie van jou vertel.

"Gestel ek oorleef ons soektog na die Horcruxe, dan sal ek Ma en Pa gaan haal en die towerspreuk ophef. Maar as ek iets oorkom – wel, dan dink ek het ek hulle goed genoeg betower om hulle veilig en gelukkig te hou. Sien jy, Wendell en Monica Wilkins weet nie hulle het 'n dogter nie."

Hermione se oë swem opnuut in trane. Ron staan weer van die bed af op, sit sy arm weer om haar en frons vir Harry asof hy hom kwalik neem vir sy gebrek aan takt. Harry kan aan niks dink om te sê nie, deels omdat dit hoogs ongewoon vir Ron is om vir iemand anders takt te leer.

"Ek – Hermione, ek's jammer – Ek het nie –"

"Nie besef ek en Ron weet baie goed wat dalk kan gebeur as ons saam met jou kom nie? Wel, ons weet. Ron, wys vir Harry wat jy gedoen het."

"Û-û, hy't nou net geëet," sê Ron.

"Toe nou, hy moet weet!"

"O, oukei. Harry, kom hier."

Ron haal sy arm vir die tweede keer van Hermione af en strompel deur toe.

"Komaan."

"Hoekom?" vra Harry en volg Ron by die kamer uit na die klein trapportaal toe.

"*Descendo,*" mompel Ron terwyl hy sy towerstaf op die lae plafon rig. 'n Luik gaan reg bokant hulle koppe oop en 'n leer gly tot by hulle voete af. Daar kom 'n aaklige half suigende, half kermende geluid uit die vierkantige gat, asook 'n onaangename reuk soos oop riole.

"Dis julle huismonster, nè?" vra Harry, wat die spook wat soms die nagtelike stilte versteur nog nooit eintlik ontmoet het nie.

"Ja, dis hy," sê Ron en klim teen die leer op. "Kom kyk bietjie na hom."

Harry volg Ron teen die paar kort trappies op tot in die piepklein solderruimte. Sy kop en skouers is al in die kamer voor hy die spook opmerk wat 'n entjie van hom af opgekrul lê, vas aan die slaap in die skemer met sy groot mond wawyd oop.

"Maar dit . . . dit lyk . . . Dra huismonsters gewoonlik pajamas?"

"Nee," sê Ron. "En hulle het ook nie gewoonlik rooi hare of so 'n slegte vel nie."

Harry bekyk die ding effens gewalg. Dit het 'n menslike vorm en grootte en dra wat, noudat Harry se oë gewoond raak aan die donker, duidelik 'n ou paar van Ron se pajamas is. Hy is ook seker huismonsters is gewoonlik taamlik slymerig en bles, eerder as opvallend harig en bedek met kwaai pers blase.

"Hy's ek, sien jy?" sê Ron.

"Nee," sê Harry. "Ek sien nie."

"Ek sal in my kamer verduidelik; die reuk raak vir my te erg," sê Ron. Hulle klim weer af met die leer wat Ron terug in die plafon sit en sluit dan weer aan by Hermione wat nog steeds boeke sorteer.

"Wanneer ons waai, gaan die huismonster hier onder in my kamer kom bly," sê Ron. "Ek dink hy sien rêrig uit daarna – wel, dis moeilik om te sê, want al wat hy kan doen, is kerm en kwyl – maar hy knik aanhoudend as ek daarvan praat. In elk geval, hy gaan ek wees met waterpokkies. Cool, hè?"

Harry lyk so verward soos wat hy is.

"Dit is!" sê Ron, duidelik gefrustreer dat Harry nog nie snap hoe briljant sy plan is nie. "Kyk, wanneer ons drie nie weer by Hogwarts opdaag nie, gaan almal dink ek en Hermione moet by jou wees, reg?

Wat beteken die Doodseters sal reguit na ons families toe kom om te sien of hulle inligting het oor waar jy is."

"Maar hopelik sal dit lyk of ek saam met Ma en Pa weg is; baie Moggelgeborenes praat op die oomblik daarvan om iewers te gaan skuil," sê Hermione.

"Ons kan nie my hele familie wegsteek nie; dit sal te verdag lyk en hulle kan nie almal hulle werk los nie," sê Ron. "So ons gaan 'n storie versprei dat ek ernstig siek is met waterpokkies en daarom nie terug skool toe kan gaan nie. As iemand dan kom ondersoek instel, kan Ma en Pa vir hulle die huismonster vol pokkies in my bed wys. Waterpokkies is baie aansteeklik, so hulle sal nie naby aan hom wil kom nie. Dit sal ook nie saak maak dat hy niks kan sê nie, want blykbaar kan jy nie as die swam eers na jou kleintongetjie toe versprei het."

"En jou ma en pa is oukei met hierdie plan?" vra Harry.

"Pa is. Hy het Fred en George gehelp om die monster te transformeer. Ma . . . wel, jy't gesien hoe is sy. Sy sal nie aanvaar ons waai voor ons nie weg is nie."

Daar is stilte in die vertrek. Dit word net onderbreek deur 'n dowwe geplof soos Hermione aanhou om boeke op die een of die ander hoop te gooi. Ron sit haar en dophou, en Harry kyk van die een na die ander, nie in staat om enigiets te sê nie. Die voorsorgmaatreëls wat hulle getref het om hulle families te beskerm, laat hom besef, meer as enigiets anders, dat hulle regtig saam met hom gaan kom en dat hulle weet presies hoe gevaarlik dit gaan wees. Hy wil vir hulle sê wat dit vir hom beteken, maar hy kan eenvoudig nie woorde vind wat belangrik genoeg is nie . . .

Deur die stilte heen kom die gedempte klanke van mevrou Weasley wat vier verdiepings onder hulle op iemand skree.

"Ginny het seker weer 'n stofkolletjie op 'n vieslike servetring gelos," sê Ron. "Ek weet nie hoekom die Delacours twee dae voor die troue al moet kom nie."

"Fleur se suster is 'n strooimeisie. Sy moet hier wees vir die repetisie en sy's te jonk om op haar eie hierheen te kom," sê Hermione terwyl sy besluiteloos na *Verby met 'n Doodsbode* staar.

"Wel, kuiergaste gaan nie Ma se stresvlakke help nie," sê Ron.

"Wat ons eintlik moet besluit," sê Hermione en gooi *Verdedigende Towerteorie* sonder 'n tweede kyk in die vullisdrom en tel *'n Evaluering van Toweronderwys in Europa* op, "is waarheen ons gaan wanneer ons hier waai. Ek weet jy't gesê jy wil eerste by Godric's Hollow uitkom, Harry, en ek verstaan hoekom, maar . . . moet ons nie die Horcruxe ons prioriteit maak nie?"

"As ons geweet het waar enige van die Horcruxe is, sou ek met jou saamgestem het," sê Harry, wat nie dink Hermione verstaan regtig hoekom hy so graag terug Godric's Hollow toe wil gaan nie. Sy ouers se grafte is net deel van die aantrekkingskrag: hy het 'n sterk maar onverklaarbare gevoel dat die plek vir hom antwoorde inhou. Miskien is dit net eenvoudig omdat dit is waar hy Voldemort se Moordvloek oorleef het; noudat hy voor die uitdaging staan om daardie prestasie te herhaal, word Harry aangetrek na die plek waar dit gebeur het, want hy wil verstaan.

"Dink jy nie daar's 'n moontlikheid dat Voldemort Godric's Hollow laat dophou nie?" vra Hermione. "Hy verwag dalk jy sal wil teruggaan om jou ouers se grafte te besoek noudat jy vry is om te gaan waar jy wil?"

Harry het nie hieraan gedink nie. Terwyl hy sukkel om 'n teenargument te kry, praat Ron, wat duidelik met sy eie gedagtegang besig is.

"Daardie R.A.B.," sê hy. "Julle weet, die een wat die regte hangertjie gesteel het?"

Hermione knik.

"Hy't in sy nota gesê hy gaan dit vernietig, nè?"

Harry sleep sy rugsak tot by hom en haal die vals Horcrux waarin R.A.B. se nota nog opgevou is, uit.

" *'Ek het die regte Horcrux gesteel en gaan dit so gou moontlik vernietig'*," lees Harry.

"Wel, sê nou hy *het* dit vernietig?" sê Ron.

"Of sy," kom Hermione tussenbeide.

"Wat ook al," sê Ron. "Dan is dit een minder vir ons om op te spoor!"

"Ja, maar ons sal nog steeds moet probeer om die regte hangertjie te vind, of hoe?" sê Hermione. "Om vas te stel of dit vernietig is, of nie."

"En as ons dit in die hande kry, *hoe* vernietig jy 'n Horcrux?" vra Ron.

"Wel," sê Hermione, "ek het navorsing daaroor gedoen."

"Hoe?" vra Harry. "Ek dog daar was geen boeke oor Horcruxe in die biblioteek nie?"

"Daar was nie," sê Hermione wat nou bloos. "Dumbledore het hulle almal verwyder, maar hy – hy het hulle nie vernietig nie."

Ron sit grootoog regop.

"Hoe in die naam van Merlin se broek het jy dit reggekry om daai Horcrux-boeke in die hande te kry?"

"Dit – dit was nie steel nie!" sê Hermione en kyk half desperaat

van Harry na Ron. "Hulle was nog steeds biblioteekboeke, selfs al het Dumbledore hulle van die rakke afgehaal. In elk geval, as hy *regtig* nie wou hê iemand moet hulle in die hande kry nie, is ek seker hy sou dit baie moeiliker gemaak het om –"

"Kom by die punt!" sê Ron.

"Wel . . . dit was maklik," sê Hermione in 'n klein stemmetjie. "Ek het net 'n Ontbiedspreuk gebruik. Julle weet – *accio*. En – toe zoem hulle by Dumbledore se studeerkamervenster uit, reguit na die meisies se slaapsaal toe."

"Maar wanneer het jy dit gedoen?" vra Harry wat na Hermione kyk met 'n mengsel van bewondering en ongeloof.

"Net ná sy – Dumbledore se – begrafnis," sê Hermione in 'n selfs kleiner stemmetjie. "Dadelik ná ons besluit het om die skool te verlaat en die Horcruxe te soek. Toe ek terug boontoe is om my goed te gaan haal, toe – toe tref dit my skielik: hoe meer ons van die goed af weet, hoe beter . . . en ek was alleen daarbo . . . so toe probeer ek . . . en dit het gewerk. Hulle het reguit by die oop venster ingevlieg en ek – ek het hulle ingepak."

Sy sluk en sê dan pleitend: "Ek kan nie dink Dumbledore sou kwaad gewees het nie; dis nie asof ons die inligting gaan gebruik om 'n Horcrux te maak nie, is dit?"

"Hoor jy ons kla?" vra Ron. "Waar is daai boeke in elk geval?"

Hermione soek vir 'n oomblik en bring dan 'n groot boek gebind in verbleikte swart leer uit die stapel te voorskyn. Dit lyk of sy effens naar voel en sy hou dit versigtig vas asof dit iets is wat onlangs dood is.

"Dit is die een wat noukeurige instruksies gee oor hoe om 'n Horcrux te maak. *Geheime van die Donkerste Kuns* – dis 'n vreeslike boek, regtig aaklig, vol bose towerkuns. Ek wonder wanneer het Dumbledore dit uit die biblioteek verwyder . . . As hy dit nie gedoen het voor hy Skoolhoof geword het nie, wed ek julle Voldemort het al die instruksies wat hy nodig gehad het hieruit gekry."

"Hoekom moes hy dan vir Slughorn vra hoe om 'n Horcrux te maak as hy dit al klaar gelees het?" vra Ron.

"Hy wou net by Slughorn uitvind wat sal gebeur as jy jou siel in sewe verdeel," sê Harry. "Dumbledore was seker Riddle het al klaar geweet hoe om 'n Horcrux te maak teen die tyd dat hy Slughorn daaroor uitgevra het. Ek dink jy's reg, Hermione; hy kon sy inligting maklik daaruit gekry het."

"En hoe meer ek oor hulle lees," sê Hermione "hoe aakliger voel hulle vir my en hoe minder kan ek glo dat hy sowaar ses gemaak het. Dié boek waarsku mens oor hoe onstabiel jy die res van jou siel maak deur dit te verdeel – en dis net as jy een Horcrux maak!"

Harry onthou wat Dumbledore gesê het van Voldemort wat verder as "gewone boosheid" gegaan het.

"Is daar enige manier hoe jy jouself weer aanmekaar kan sit?" vra Ron.

"Ja," sê Hermione met 'n hol glimlag, "maar dit sal ondraaglik seer wees."

"Hoekom? Hoe doen 'n mens dit?" vra Harry.

"Berou," sê Hermione. "Jy moet regtig diep voel oor wat jy gedoen het. Daar is 'n voetnota. Blykbaar kan die pyn daarvan jou vernietig. Ek kan nie eintlik sien dat Voldemort dit sal probeer doen nie; wat dink julle?"

"Nee," sê Ron voor Harry kan antwoord. "So daai boek sê vir 'n mens hoe om Horcruxe te vernietig?"

"Ja," sê Hermione, wat die verweerde bladsye omblaai asof sy verrotte binnegoed bestudeer, "want dit waarsku Donker towenaars hoe sterk hulle die betowerings op hulle moet maak. Uit alles wat ek gelees het, was wat Harry met Riddle se dagboek gedoen het een van die min regtig onfeilbare maniere om 'n Horcrux te vernietig."

"Wat, om 'n Basilisktand daarin te steek?" vra Harry.

"O wel, dan is ons gelukkig om so 'n groot voorraad Basilisktande te hê," sê Ron. "Ek het gewonder wat ons daarmee gaan doen."

"Dit hoef nie 'n Basilisktand te wees nie," sê Hermione geduldig. "Dit moet iets wees wat so vernietigend is dat die Horcrux homself nie kan herstel nie. Basiliskgif het net een teengif, en dis ongelooflik seldsaam –"

"– fenikstrane," sê Harry bevestigend.

"Presies," sê Hermione. "Ons probleem is dat baie min stowwe so vernietigend soos Basiliskgif is, en hulle is almal gevaarlik om rond te dra. Dis egter 'n probleem wat ons sal moet oplos, want dit gaan nie genoeg wees om 'n Horcrux te skeur, te breek of te verpletter nie. Jy moet dit onmoontlik maak dat dit met towerkrag herstel kan word."

"Maar selfs al vernietig ons die ding waarin dit lewe," sê Ron, "hoekom kan die stukkie siel daarin nie net in iets anders gaan lewe nie?"

"Want 'n Horcrux is die totaal teenoorgestelde van 'n mens."

Hermione sien Harry en Ron lyk heeltemal verward en verduidelik vinnig: "Kyk, as ek nou 'n swaard optel en jou daarmee deurboor, Ron, dan sal ek geen skade aan jou siel doen nie."

"Wat natuurlik vir my 'n groot troos sal wees," sê Ron.

Harry lag.

"Dit behoort eintlik te wees! Maar my punt is: wat ook al met jou

liggaam gebeur, jou siel sal oorleef, ongeskonde," sê Hermione. "Maar dis andersom met 'n Horcrux. Die deel van die siel in daardie liggaam, maak staat op sy towerliggaam vir oorlewing. Dit kan nie daarsonder bestaan nie."

"Daai dagboek is soort van dood toe ek dit gesteek het," sê Harry. Hy onthou hoe die ink soos bloed uit die deurboorde bladsye gevloei het en hoe daardie deel van Voldemort se siel gillend verdwyn het.

"En toe die dagboek eers ordentlik vernietig is, kon die stukkie siel wat daarin vasgevang was nie meer bestaan nie. Ginny het voor jou van die dagboek ontslae probeer te raak deur dit weg te spoel, maar dit het natuurlik so goed soos nuut teruggekom."

"Wag bietjie," sê Ron fronsend. "Die stukkie siel in daardie dagboek het besit van Ginny geneem, nie waar nie? Hoe werk dit dan?"

"Terwyl die getoorde gasheer-liggaam nog onbeskadig is, kan die stukkie siel daarin in- en uitfladder na 'n persoon as die te naby daaraan kom. Ek bedoel nie dit lank vashou nie; dit het niks met aanraking te doen nie," voeg sy by voor Ron kan praat. "Ek bedoel emosioneel naby. Ginny het haar hart in daardie dagboek uitgestort; sy het haarself ongelooflik kwetsbaar gemaak. Jy's in die moeilikheid as jy te geheg aan of te afhanklik van die Horcrux raak."

"Ek wonder hoe Dumbledore die ring vernietig het?' sê Harry. "Hoekom het ek hom nie gevra nie? Ek het nooit regtig . . ."

Sy stem sterf weg: Harry dink aan al die dinge wat hy vir Dumbledore moes gevra het en aan hoe dit sedert die Skoolhoof dood is vir hom voel of hy, toe Dumbledore nog gelewe het, soveel geleenthede verbeur het om meer uit te vind . . . om alles uit te vind . . .

Die stilte word verbreek toe die slaapkamer se deur oopvlieg met 'n knal wat die muur laat skud. Hermione gee 'n gilletjie en laat val *Geheime van die Donkerste Kuns*; Kromskeen hardloop verontwaardig en blasend onder die bed in; Ron spring van die bed af op, gly op 'n weggegooide Sjokoladepadda-papiertjie en kap sy kop teen die oorkantse muur, en Harry duik instinktief vir sy towerstaf voor hy besef hy kyk op na mevrou Weasley. Haar hare is deurmekaar en haar gesig is vertrek van woede.

"Ek is jammer om hierdie gesellige byeenkomsie te onderbreek," sê sy met 'n bewende stem. "Ek is seker julle het almal rus nodig . . . maar daar is trougeskenke wat uitgesorteer moet word in my kamer opgestapel en ek was onder die indruk dat julle ingestem het om te help."

"O ja," sê Hermione, wat verskrik op die been kom en boeke in alle rigtings laat vlieg, "ons wil . . . ons is jammer . . ."

Met 'n benoude kyk na Ron en Harry haas Hermione haar agter mevrou Weasley aan by die kamer uit.

"Dis soos om 'n huiself te wees," kla Ron gedemp en vryf nog steeds sy kop terwyl hy en Harry haar volg. "Maar net sonder die werksbevrediging. Hoe gouer hierdie troue verby is, hoe gelukkiger gaan ek wees."

"Ja," sê Harry, "dan hoef ons niks te doen behalwe om Horcruxe te kry nie . . . Dit sal soos 'n vakansie wees, nè?"

Ron begin lag, maar toe hy die enorme stapel trougeskenke sien wat vir hulle in mevrou Weasley se kamer wag, hou hy dadelik op.

Die Delacours arriveer elfuur die volgende oggend. Harry, Ron, Hermione en Ginny voel teen hierdie tyd taamlik wrewelrig teenoor Fleur se familie, Ron marsjeer vies boontoe om bypassende sokkies te gaan aantrek, en Harry probeer om sy hare plat te kry. Nadat hulle almal as deftig genoeg verklaar is, loop hulle op 'n streep uit na die sonnige werf toe om die besoekers in te wag.

Harry het die plek nog nooit so netjies gesien lyk nie. Die geroeste hekseketels en ou waterstewels wat gewoonlik op die trappies by die agterdeur rondgelê het, is weg en vervang deur twee nuwe fladderbosse wat aan weerskante van die deur in groot potte staan; al is daar nie 'n briesie nie waai die blare lui en skep 'n betowerende rimpeleffek. Die hoenders is toegemaak, die werf is gevee en die tuin verder ondertoe is gesnoei, gepluk en oor die algemeen netjies gemaak. Harry hou egter daarvan wanneer dit so toegegroei is en dink dit lyk 'n bietjie verlate sonder die gewone spulletjie bokspringende aardmannetjies.

Hy het tred verloor van hoeveel sekuriteitspaljasse die Orde sowel as die Ministerie op Die Konynenes geplaas het; al wat hy weet, is dit is nie meer vir enigiemand moontlik om met behulp van towerkrag direk na die plek toe te kom nie. Daarom is meneer Weasley weg om die Delacours op 'n nabygeleë heuwel waarvandaan hulle per Poortsleutel sal arriveer, te gaan ontmoet. Die eerste geluid van hulle wat nader kom, is 'n ongewoon hoë laggie wat meneer Weasley s'n blyk te wees. Hy verskyn oomblikke later by die hek, belaai met bagasie, en lei 'n pragtige blonde vrou in 'n lang blaargroen kleed wat net Fleur se ma kan wees, binne.

"*Maman!*" roep Fleur uit en hardloop vorentoe om haar te omhels. "*Papa!*"

Monsieur Delacour is nie naastenby so aantreklik soos sy vrou nie; hy is 'n kop korter en geweldig geset met 'n klein, gepunte swart baardjie. Hy lyk egter goedgeaard. Hy bons op hoëhakstewels

na mevrou Weasley toe en maak haar verbouereerd deur haar twee keer op elke wang te soen.

"U 'et soveel moeite gedoen," sê hy in 'n diep stem. "Fleur sê vir ons u 'et baie 'ard gewerk."

"Og, dit was niks, niks nie!" sê mevrou Weasley met 'n trillende stem. "G'n moeite hoegenaamd nie!"

Ron gee uiting aan sy gevoelens deur 'n aardmannetjie wat agter een van die fladderbosse uitloer, te skop.

"Liewe dame!" sê monsieur Delacour wat mevrou Weasley se hand nog steeds stralend tussen sy twee pofferhande vashou. "Die naderende eenwording van ons twee families is vir ons 'n groot eer! Laat my toe om u voor te stel aan my vrou, Apolline."

Madame Delacour sweef vorentoe en buig ook vooroor om mevrou Weasley te soen.

"*Enchantée,*" sê sy. "U man 'et vir ons sulke amusante stories vertel!"

Meneer Weasley gee 'n maniese laggie en mevrou Weasley gee vir hom 'n kyk; hy word onmiddellik stil en neem 'n uitdrukking aan wat pas by 'n hegte vriend se siekbed.

"En julle 'et natuurlik al my klein dogtertjie, Gabrielle, ontmoet!" sê monsieur Delacour. Gabrielle is 'n miniatuur Fleur: elf jaar oud, met blink silwerblonde hare wat tot agter op haar middel hang. Sy gee vir mevrou Weasley 'n stralende glimlag en omhels haar, dan kyk sy gloeiend na Harry en knipper haar ooglede. Ginny maak hard keel skoon.

"Wel, kom gerus in!" sê mevrou Weasley opgewek en sy lei die Delacours by die huis in met baie "Nee, asseblief!"s en "Stap voor!"s en "Nee, glad nie!"s.

Dit word gou duidelik dat die Delacours hulpvaardige en aangename gaste is. Hulle is ingenome met alles en gretig om te help met die voorbereidings vir die troue. Monsieur Delacour verklaar alles van die sitplekreëlings tot die strooimeisies se skoene "*charmant!*" Madame Delacour is baie bedrewe in huishoudelike towerspreuke en kry die oond binne 'n ommesientjie ordentlik skoon; Gabrielle volg haar ouer suster oral en probeer op enige moontlike manier help terwyl sy in vinnige Frans babbel.

Een nadeel is dat Die Konynenes nie gebou is om soveel mense te huisves nie. Meneer en mevrou Weasley slaap nou in die sitkamer nadat hulle niks van monsieur en madame Delacour se besware wou hoor nie en daarop aangedring het dat hulle die hoofslaapkamer gebruik. Gabrielle slaap saam met Fleur in Percy se ou kamer en Bill sal sy kamer deel met Charlie, sy strooijonker, wanneer

Charlie van Roemenië af terugkom. Daar duik feitlik nooit meer geleenthede op om saam planne te beraam nie, en Harry, Ron en Hermione bied uit desperaatheid vrywillig aan om die hoenders te voer net om uit die oorvol huis te ontsnap.

"Maar sy los ons nog *steeds* nie uit nie!" grom Ron toe hulle tweede poging om op die werf bymekaar te kom, gedwarsboom word deur mevrou Weasley wat met 'n groot mandjie wasgoed in haar arms verskyn.

"O, dis goed julle het die hoenders gevoer," roep sy uit terwyl sy nader kom. "Ons beter hulle maar weer in die hok sit voor die manne môre kom . . . om die tent vir die troue op te slaan," verduidelik sy en leun dan vir 'n oomblik teen die hoenderhok. Sy lyk uitgeput. "Millamant se Magiese Markiestente . . . Hulle's baie goed. Bill vergesel hulle . . . Jy moet maar liewer binne bly terwyl hulle hier is, Harry. Ek moet sê, al hierdie sekuriteitspaljasse om die plek maak dit moeilik om 'n troue te reël."

"Ek's jammer," sê Harry nederig.

"Og, moenie laf wees nie, skat!" sê mevrou Weasley dadelik. "Ek het nie bedoel – wel, jou veiligheid is baie belangriker! Ek wou jou eintlik nog gevra het hoe jy jou verjaardag wil vier, Harry. Sewentien is per slot van rekening 'n belangrike dag . . .

"Ek wil nie 'n groot gedruis hê nie," sê Harry vinnig, want hy kan hom al voorstel hoeveel ekstra spanning dit op hulle almal sal plaas. "Regtig, mevrou Weasley, net 'n gewone aandete sal doodreg wees . . . Dis die dag voor die troue . . ."

"O wel, as jy seker is, skat. Ek sal Remus en Tonks nooi, of wat sê jy? En wat van Hagrid?"

"Dit sal wonderlik wees," sê Harry. "Maar moet asseblief nie 'n klomp moeite doen nie."

"Nee, glad nie, glad nie . . . Dis niks moeite nie . . ."

Sy kyk na hom, 'n lang, ondersoekende kyk, dan glimlag sy effens hartseer, trek haar regop en loop weg. Harry kyk hoe sy haar towerstaf naby die wasgoeddraad swaai en die nat klere in die lug opstyg om hulle self op te hang, en skielik voel hy 'n groot golf van berou oor die ongerief en pyn wat hy haar besorg.

CHAPTER SEVEN



THE WILL OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

He was walking along a mountain road in the cool blue light of dawn. Far below, swathed in mist, was the shadow of a small town. Was the man he sought down there, the man he needed so badly he could think of little else, the man who held the answer, the answer to his problem . . . ?

"Oi, wake up."

Harry opened his eyes. He was lying again on the camp bed in Ron's dingy attic room. The sun had not yet risen and the room was still shadowy. Pigwidgeon was asleep with his head under his tiny wing. The scar on Harry's forehead was prickling.

"You were muttering in your sleep."

"Was I?"

"Yeah. 'Gregorovitch.' You kept saying 'Gregorovitch.'"

Harry was not wearing his glasses; Ron's face appeared slightly blurred.

"Who's Gregorovitch?"

"I dunno, do I? You were the one saying it."

Harry rubbed his forehead, thinking. He had a vague idea he had heard the name before, but he could not think where.

"I think Voldemort's looking for him."

"Poor bloke," said Ron fervently.

Harry sat up, still rubbing his scar, now wide awake. He tried to remember exactly what he had seen in the dream, but all that came back was a mountainous horizon and the outline of the little village cradled in a deep valley.

"I think he's abroad."

"Who, Gregorovitch?"

"Voldemort. I think he's somewhere abroad, looking for Gregorovitch. It didn't look like anywhere in Britain."

"You reckon you were seeing into his mind again?"

Ron sounded worried.

"Do me a favor and don't tell Hermione," said Harry. "Although how she expects me to stop seeing stuff in my sleep . . ."

He gazed up at little Pigwidgeon's cage, thinking . . . Why was the name "Gregorovitch" familiar?

"I think," he said slowly, "he's got something to do with Quidditch. There's some connection, but I can't — I can't think what it is."

"Quidditch?" said Ron. "Sure you're not thinking of Gorgovitch?"

"Who?"

"Dragomir Gorgovitch, Chaser, transferred to the Chudley Cannons for a record fee two years ago. Record holder for most Quaffle drops in a season."

"No," said Harry. "I'm definitely not thinking of Gorgovitch."

"I try not to either," said Ron. "Well, happy birthday anyway."

"Wow — that's right, I forgot! I'm seventeen!"

Harry seized the wand lying beside his camp bed, pointed it at the cluttered desk where he had left his glasses, and said, *"Accio Glasses!"* Although they were only around a foot away, there was something immensely satisfying about seeing them zoom toward him, at least until they poked him in the eye.

"Slick," snorted Ron.

Reveling in the removal of his Trace, Harry sent Ron's possessions flying around the room, causing Pigwidgeon to wake up and flutter excitedly around his cage. Harry also tried tying the laces of his trainers by magic (the resultant knot took several minutes to untie by hand) and, purely for the pleasure of it, turned the orange robes on Ron's Chudley Cannons posters bright blue.

"I'd do your fly by hand, though," Ron advised Harry, sniggering when Harry immediately checked it. "Here's your present. Unwrap it up here, it's not for my mother's eyes."

"A book?" said Harry as he took the rectangular parcel. "Bit of a departure from tradition, isn't it?"

"This isn't your average book," said Ron. "It's pure gold: *Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches*. Explains everything you need to know about girls. If only I'd had this last year I'd have known exactly

how to get rid of Lavender and I would've known how to get going with . . . Well, Fred and George gave me a copy, and I've learned a lot. You'd be surprised, it's not all about wandwork, either."

When they arrived in the kitchen they found a pile of presents waiting on the table. Bill and Monsieur Delacour were finishing their breakfasts, while Mrs. Weasley stood chatting to them over the frying pan.

"Arthur told me to wish you a happy seventeenth, Harry," said Mrs. Weasley, beaming at him. "He had to leave early for work, but he'll be back for dinner. That's our present on top."

Harry sat down, took the square parcel she had indicated, and unwrapped it. Inside was a watch very like the one Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had given Ron for his seventeenth; it was gold, with stars circling around the face instead of hands.

"It's traditional to give a wizard a watch when he comes of age," said Mrs. Weasley, watching him anxiously from beside the cooker. "I'm afraid that one isn't new like Ron's, it was actually my brother Fabian's and he wasn't terribly careful with his possessions, it's a bit dented on the back, but —"

The rest of her speech was lost; Harry had got up and hugged her. He tried to put a lot of unsaid things into the hug and perhaps she understood them, because she patted his cheek clumsily when he released her, then waved her wand in a slightly random way, causing half a pack of bacon to flop out of the frying pan onto the floor.

"Happy birthday, Harry!" said Hermione, hurrying into the kitchen and adding her own present to the top of the pile. "It's not much, but I hope you like it. What did you get him?" she added to Ron, who

seemed not to hear her.

“Come on, then, open Hermione’s!” said Ron.

She had bought him a new Sneakoscope. The other packages contained an enchanted razor from Bill and Fleur (“Ah yes, zis will give you ze smoothest shave you will ever ’ave,” Monsieur Delacour assured him, “but you must tell it clearly what you want . . . ozzerwise you might find you ’ave a leetle less hair zan you would like. . . .”), chocolates from the Delacours, and an enormous box of the latest Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes merchandise from Fred and George.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione did not linger at the table, as the arrival of Madame Delacour, Fleur, and Gabrielle made the kitchen uncomfortably crowded.

“I’ll pack these for you,” Hermione said brightly, taking Harry’s presents out of his arms as the three of them headed back upstairs. “I’m nearly done, I’m just waiting for the rest of your underpants to come out of the wash, Ron —”

Ron’s splutter was interrupted by the opening of a door on the first-floor landing.

“Harry, will you come in here a moment?”

It was Ginny. Ron came to an abrupt halt, but Hermione took him by the elbow and tugged him on up the stairs. Feeling nervous, Harry followed Ginny into her room.

He had never been inside it before. It was small, but bright. There was a large poster of the Wizarding band the Weird Sisters on one wall, and a picture of Gwenog Jones, Captain of the all-witch Quidditch team the Holyhead Harpies, on the other. A desk stood

facing the open window, which looked out over the orchard where he and Ginny had once played two-a-side Quidditch with Ron and Hermione, and which now housed a large, pearly white marquee. The golden flag on top was level with Ginny's window.

Ginny looked up into Harry's face, took a deep breath, and said, "Happy seventeenth."

"Yeah . . . thanks."

She was looking at him steadily; he, however, found it difficult to look back at her; it was like gazing into a brilliant light.

"Nice view," he said feebly, pointing toward the window.

She ignored this. He could not blame her.

"I couldn't think what to get you," she said.

"You didn't have to get me anything."

She disregarded this too.

"I didn't know what would be useful. Nothing too big, because you wouldn't be able to take it with you."

He chanced a glance at her. She was not tearful; that was one of the many wonderful things about Ginny, she was rarely weepy. He had sometimes thought that having six brothers must have toughened her up.

She took a step closer to him.

"So then I thought, I'd like you to have something to remember me by, you know, if you meet some veela when you're off doing whatever you're doing."

"I think dating opportunities are going to be pretty thin on the ground, to be honest."

"There's the silver lining I've been looking for," she whispered, and then she was kissing him as she had never kissed him before, and Harry was kissing her back, and it was blissful oblivion, better than firewhisky; she was the only real thing in the world, Ginny, the feel of her, one hand at her back and one in her long, sweet-smelling hair —

The door banged open behind them and they jumped apart.

"Oh," said Ron pointedly. "Sorry."

"Ron!" Hermione was just behind him, slightly out of breath. There was a strained silence, then Ginny said in a flat little voice,

"Well, happy birthday anyway, Harry."

Ron's ears were scarlet; Hermione looked nervous. Harry wanted to slam the door in their faces, but it felt as though a cold draft had entered the room when the door opened, and his shining moment had popped like a soap bubble. All the reasons for ending his relationship with Ginny, for staying well away from her, seemed to have slunk inside the room with Ron, and all happy forgetfulness was gone.

He looked at Ginny, wanting to say something, though he hardly knew what, but she had turned her back on him. He thought that she might have succumbed, for once, to tears. He could not do anything to comfort her in front of Ron.

"I'll see you later," he said, and followed the other two out of the bedroom.

Ron marched downstairs, through the still-crowded kitchen and into the yard, and Harry kept pace with him all the way, Hermione trotting along behind them looking scared.

Once he reached the seclusion of the freshly mown lawn, Ron rounded on Harry.

"You ditched her. What are you doing now, messing her around?"

"I'm not messing her around," said Harry, as Hermione caught up with them.

"Ron —"

But Ron held up a hand to silence her.

"She was really cut up when you ended it —"

"So was I. You know why I stopped it, and it wasn't because I wanted to."

"Yeah, but you go snogging her now and she's just going to get her hopes up again —"

"She's not an idiot, she knows it can't happen, she's not expecting us to — to end up married, or —"

As he said it, a vivid picture formed in Harry's mind of Ginny in a white dress, marrying a tall, faceless, and unpleasant stranger. In one spiraling moment it seemed to hit him: Her future was free and unencumbered, whereas his . . . he could see nothing but Voldemort ahead.

"If you keep groping her every chance you get —"

"It won't happen again," said Harry harshly. The day was cloudless, but he felt as though the sun had gone in. "Okay?"

Ron looked half resentful, half sheepish; he rocked backward and forward on his feet for a moment, then said, "Right then, well, that's . . . yeah."

Ginny did not seek another one-to-one meeting with Harry for the rest of the day, nor by any look or gesture did she show that they had

shared more than polite conversation in her room. Nevertheless, Charlie's arrival came as a relief to Harry. It provided a distraction, watching Mrs. Weasley force Charlie into a chair, raise her wand threateningly, and announce that he was about to get a proper haircut.

As Harry's birthday dinner would have stretched the Burrow's kitchen to breaking point even before the arrival of Charlie, Lupin, Tonks, and Hagrid, several tables were placed end to end in the garden. Fred and George bewitched a number of purple lanterns, all emblazoned with a large number 17, to hang in midair over the guests. Thanks to Mrs. Weasley's ministrations, George's wound was neat and clean, but Harry was not yet used to the dark hole in the side of his head, despite the twins' many jokes about it.

Hermione made purple and gold streamers erupt from the end of her wand and drape themselves artistically over the trees and bushes.

"Nice," said Ron, as with one final flourish of her wand, Hermione turned the leaves on the crabapple tree to gold. "You've really got an eye for that sort of thing."

"Thank you, Ron!" said Hermione, looking both pleased and a little confused. Harry turned away, smiling to himself. He had a funny notion that he would find a chapter on compliments when he found time to peruse his copy of *Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches*; he caught Ginny's eye and grinned at her before remembering his promise to Ron and hurriedly striking up a conversation with Monsieur Delacour.

"Out of the way, out of the way!" sang Mrs. Weasley, coming through the gate with what appeared to be a giant, beach-ball-sized Snitch floating in front of her. Seconds later Harry realized that it

was his birthday cake, which Mrs. Weasley was suspending with her wand, rather than risk carrying it over the uneven ground. When the cake had finally landed in the middle of the table, Harry said,

"That looks amazing, Mrs. Weasley."

"Oh, it's nothing, dear," she said fondly. Over her shoulder, Ron gave Harry the thumbs-up and mouthed, *Good one*.

By seven o'clock all the guests had arrived, led into the house by Fred and George, who had waited for them at the end of the lane. Hagrid had honored the occasion by wearing his best, and horrible, hairy brown suit. Although Lupin smiled as he shook Harry's hand, Harry thought he looked rather unhappy. It was all very odd; Tonks, beside him, looked simply radiant.

"Happy birthday, Harry," she said, hugging him tightly.

"Seventeen, eh!" said Hagrid as he accepted a bucket-sized glass of wine from Fred. "Six years ter the day since we met, Harry, d'yeh remember it?"

"Vaguely," said Harry, grinning up at him. "Didn't you smash down the front door, give Dudley a pig's tail, and tell me I was a wizard?"

"I forge' the details," Hagrid chortled. "All righ', Ron, Hermione?"

"We're fine," said Hermione. "How are you?"

"Ar, not bad. Bin busy, we got some newborn unicorns, I'll show yeh when yeh get back —" Harry avoided Ron's and Hermione's gazes as Hagrid rummaged in his pocket. "Here, Harry — couldn' think what ter get yeh, but then I remembered this." He pulled out a small, slightly furry drawstring pouch with a long string, evidently intended to be worn around the neck. "Mokeskin. Hide anythin' in

there an' no one but the owner can get it out. They're rare, them."

"Hagrid, thanks!"

"'S'nothin'," said Hagrid with a wave of a dustbin-lid-sized hand. "An' there's Charlie! Always liked him — hey! Charlie!"

Charlie approached, running his hand slightly ruefully over his new, brutally short haircut. He was shorter than Ron, thickset, with a number of burns and scratches up his muscley arms.

"Hi, Hagrid, how's it going?"

"Bin meanin' ter write fer ages. How's Norbert doin'?"

"Norbert?" Charlie laughed. "The Norwegian Ridgeback? We call her Norberta now."

"Wha — Norbert's a girl?"

"Oh yeah," said Charlie.

"How can you tell?" asked Hermione.

"They're a lot more vicious," said Charlie. He looked over his shoulder and dropped his voice. "Wish Dad would hurry up and get here. Mum's getting edgy."

They all looked over at Mrs. Weasley. She was trying to talk to Madame Delacour while glancing repeatedly at the gate.

"I think we'd better start without Arthur," she called to the garden at large after a moment or two. "He must have been held up at — oh!"

They all saw it at the same time: a streak of light that came flying across the yard and onto the table, where it resolved itself into a bright silver weasel, which stood on its hind legs and spoke with Mr. Weasley's voice.

"Minister of Magic coming with me."

The Patronus dissolved into thin air, leaving Fleur's family peering in astonishment at the place where it had vanished.

"We shouldn't be here," said Lupin at once. "Harry — I'm sorry — I'll explain another time —"

He seized Tonks's wrist and pulled her away; they reached the fence, climbed over it, and vanished from sight. Mrs. Weasley looked bewildered.

"The Minister — but why — ? I don't understand —"

But there was no time to discuss the matter; a second later, Mr. Weasley had appeared out of thin air at the gate, accompanied by Rufus Scrimgeour, instantly recognizable by his mane of grizzled hair.

The two newcomers marched across the yard toward the garden and the lantern-lit table, where everybody sat in silence, watching them draw closer. As Scrimgeour came within range of the lantern light, Harry saw that he looked much older than the last time they had met, scraggy and grim.

"Sorry to intrude," said Scrimgeour, as he limped to a halt before the table. "Especially as I can see that I am gate-crashing a party."

His eyes lingered for a moment on the giant Snitch cake.

"Many happy returns."

"Thanks," said Harry.

"I require a private word with you," Scrimgeour went on. "Also with Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger."

"Us?" said Ron, sounding surprised. "Why us?"

"I shall tell you that when we are somewhere more private," said

Scrimgeour. “Is there such a place?” he demanded of Mr. Weasley.

“Yes, of course,” said Mr. Weasley, who looked nervous. “The, er, sitting room, why don’t you use that?”

“You can lead the way,” Scrimgeour said to Ron. “There will be no need for you to accompany us, Arthur.”

Harry saw Mr. Weasley exchange a worried look with Mrs. Weasley as he, Ron, and Hermione stood up. As they led the way back to the house in silence, Harry knew that the other two were thinking the same as he was: Scrimgeour must, somehow, have learned that the three of them were planning to drop out of Hogwarts.

Scrimgeour did not speak as they all passed through the messy kitchen and into the Burrow’s sitting room. Although the garden had been full of soft golden evening light, it was already dark in here: Harry flicked his wand at the oil lamps as he entered and they illuminated the shabby but cozy room. Scrimgeour sat himself in the sagging armchair that Mr. Weasley normally occupied, leaving Harry, Ron, and Hermione to squeeze side by side onto the sofa. Once they had done so, Scrimgeour spoke.

“I have some questions for the three of you, and I think it will be best if we do it individually. If you two” — he pointed at Harry and Hermione — “can wait upstairs, I will start with Ronald.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” said Harry, while Hermione nodded vigorously. “You can speak to us together, or not at all.”

Scrimgeour gave Harry a cold, appraising look. Harry had the impression that the Minister was wondering whether it was worthwhile opening hostilities this early.

“Very well then, together,” he said, shrugging. He cleared his

throat. “I am here, as I’m sure you know, because of Albus Dumbledore’s will.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another.

“A surprise, apparently! You were not aware then that Dumbledore had left you anything?”

“A-all of us?” said Ron. “Me and Hermione too?”

“Yes, all of —”

But Harry interrupted.

“Dumbledore died over a month ago. Why has it taken this long to give us what he left us?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” said Hermione, before Scrimgeour could answer. “They wanted to examine whatever he’s left us. You had no right to do that!” she said, and her voice trembled slightly.

“I had every right,” said Scrimgeour dismissively. “The Decree for Justifiable Confiscation gives the Ministry the power to confiscate the contents of a will —”

“That law was created to stop wizards passing on Dark artifacts,” said Hermione, “and the Ministry is supposed to have powerful evidence that the deceased’s possessions are illegal before seizing them! Are you telling me that you thought Dumbledore was trying to pass us something cursed?”

“Are you planning to follow a career in Magical Law, Miss Granger?” asked Scrimgeour.

“No, I’m not,” retorted Hermione. “I’m hoping to do some good in the world!”

Ron laughed. Scrimgeour’s eyes flickered toward him and away again as Harry spoke.

"So why have you decided to let us have our things now? Can't think of a pretext to keep them?"

"No, it'll be because the thirty-one days are up," said Hermione at once. "They can't keep the objects longer than that unless they can prove they're dangerous. Right?"

"Would you say you were close to Dumbledore, Ronald?" asked Scrimgeour, ignoring Hermione. Ron looked startled.

"Me? Not — not really . . . It was always Harry who . . ."

Ron looked around at Harry and Hermione, to see Hermione giving him a *stop-talking-now!* sort of look, but the damage was done: Scrimgeour looked as though he had heard exactly what he had expected, and wanted, to hear. He swooped like a bird of prey upon Ron's answer.

"If you were not very close to Dumbledore, how do you account for the fact that he remembered you in his will? He made exceptionally few personal bequests. The vast majority of his possessions — his private library, his magical instruments, and other personal effects — were left to Hogwarts. Why do you think you were singled out?"

"I . . . dunno," said Ron. "I . . . when I say we weren't close . . . I mean, I think he liked me. . . ."

"You're being modest, Ron," said Hermione. "Dumbledore was very fond of you."

This was stretching the truth to breaking point; as far as Harry knew, Ron and Dumbledore had never been alone together, and direct contact between them had been negligible. However, Scrimgeour did not seem to be listening. He put his hand inside his cloak and drew

out a drawstring pouch much larger than the one Hagrid had given Harry. From it, he removed a scroll of parchment which he unrolled and read aloud.

"'*The Last Will and Testament of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore*' . . . Yes, here we are . . . '*To Ronald Bilius Weasley, I leave my Deluminator, in the hope that he will remember me when he uses it.*'"

Scrimgeour took from the bag an object that Harry had seen before: It looked something like a silver cigarette lighter, but it had, he knew, the power to suck all light from a place, and restore it, with a simple click. Scrimgeour leaned forward and passed the Deluminator to Ron, who took it and turned it over in his fingers, looking stunned.

"That is a valuable object," said Scrimgeour, watching Ron. "It may even be unique. Certainly it is of Dumbledore's own design. Why would he have left you an item so rare?"

Ron shook his head, looking bewildered.

"Dumbledore must have taught thousands of students," Scrimgeour persevered. "Yet the only ones he remembered in his will are you three. Why is that? To what use did he think you would put his Deluminator, Mr. Weasley?"

"Put out lights, I s'pose," mumbled Ron. "What else could I do with it?"

Evidently Scrimgeour had no suggestions. After squinting at Ron for a moment or two, he turned back to Dumbledore's will.

"'*To Miss Hermione Jean Granger, I leave my copy of* The Tales of Beedle the Bard, *in the hope that she will find it entertaining and*

instructive.'"

Scrimgeour now pulled out of the bag a small book that looked as ancient as the copy of *Secrets of the Darkest Art* upstairs. Its binding was stained and peeling in places. Hermione took it from Scrimgeour without a word. She held the book in her lap and gazed at it. Harry saw that the title was in runes; he had never learned to read them. As he looked, a tear splashed onto the embossed symbols.

"Why do you think Dumbledore left you that book, Miss Granger?" asked Scrimgeour.

"He . . . he knew I liked books," said Hermione in a thick voice, mopping her eyes with her sleeve.

"But why that particular book?"

"I don't know. He must have thought I'd enjoy it."

"Did you ever discuss codes, or any means of passing secret messages, with Dumbledore?"

"No, I didn't," said Hermione, still wiping her eyes on her sleeve. "And if the Ministry hasn't found any hidden codes in this book in thirty-one days, I doubt that I will."

She suppressed a sob. They were wedged together so tightly that Ron had difficulty extracting his arm to put it around Hermione's shoulders. Scrimgeour turned back to the will.

"*'To Harry James Potter,'*" he read, and Harry's insides contracted with a sudden excitement, "*'I leave the Snitch he caught in his first Quidditch match at Hogwarts, as a reminder of the rewards of perseverance and skill.'*"

As Scrimgeour pulled out the tiny, walnut-sized golden ball, its silver wings fluttered rather feebly, and Harry could not help feeling

a definite sense of anticlimax.

"Why did Dumbledore leave you this Snitch?" asked Scrimgeour.

"No idea," said Harry. "For the reasons you just read out, I suppose . . . to remind me what you can get if you . . . persevere and whatever it was."

"You think this a mere symbolic keepsake, then?"

"I suppose so," said Harry. "What else could it be?"

"I'm asking the questions," said Scrimgeour, shifting his chair a little closer to the sofa. Dusk was really falling outside now; the marquee beyond the windows towered ghostly white over the hedge.

"I notice that your birthday cake is in the shape of a Snitch," Scrimgeour said to Harry. "Why is that?"

Hermione laughed derisively.

"Oh, it can't be a reference to the fact Harry's a great Seeker, that's way too obvious," she said. "There must be a secret message from Dumbledore hidden in the icing!"

"I don't think there's anything hidden in the icing," said Scrimgeour, "but a Snitch would be a very good hiding place for a small object. You know why, I'm sure?"

Harry shrugged. Hermione, however, answered: Harry thought that answering questions correctly was such a deeply ingrained habit she could not suppress the urge.

"Because Snitches have flesh memories," she said.

"What?" said Harry and Ron together; both considered Hermione's Quidditch knowledge negligible.

"Correct," said Scrimgeour. "A Snitch is not touched by bare skin before it is released, not even by the maker, who wears gloves. It

carries an enchantment by which it can identify the first human to lay hands upon it, in case of a disputed capture. This Snitch" — he held up the tiny golden ball — "will remember your touch, Potter. It occurs to me that Dumbledore, who had prodigious magical skill, whatever his other faults, might have enchanted this Snitch so that it will open only for you."

Harry's heart was beating rather fast. He was sure that Scrimgeour was right. How could he avoid taking the Snitch with his bare hand in front of the Minister?

"You don't say anything," said Scrimgeour. "Perhaps you already know what the Snitch contains?"

"No," said Harry, still wondering how he could appear to touch the Snitch without really doing so. If only he knew Legilimency, really knew it, and could read Hermione's mind; he could practically hear her brain whirring beside him.

"Take it," said Scrimgeour quietly.

Harry met the Minister's yellow eyes and knew he had no option but to obey. He held out his hand, and Scrimgeour leaned forward again and placed the Snitch, slowly and deliberately, into Harry's palm.

Nothing happened. As Harry's fingers closed around the Snitch, its tired wings fluttered and were still. Scrimgeour, Ron, and Hermione continued to gaze avidly at the now partially concealed ball, as if still hoping it might transform in some way.

"That was dramatic," said Harry coolly. Both Ron and Hermione laughed.

"That's all, then, is it?" asked Hermione, making to prise herself

off the sofa.

"Not quite," said Scrimgeour, who looked bad-tempered now. "Dumbledore left you a second bequest, Potter."

"What is it?" asked Harry, excitement rekindling.

Scrimgeour did not bother to read from the will this time.

"The sword of Godric Gryffindor," he said.

Hermione and Ron both stiffened. Harry looked around for a sign of the ruby-encrusted hilt, but Scrimgeour did not pull the sword from the leather pouch, which in any case looked much too small to contain it.

"So where is it?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Unfortunately," said Scrimgeour, "that sword was not Dumbledore's to give away. The sword of Godric Gryffindor is an important historical artifact, and as such, belongs —"

"It belongs to Harry!" said Hermione hotly. "It chose him, he was the one who found it, it came to him out of the Sorting Hat —"

"According to reliable historical sources, the sword may present itself to any worthy Gryffindor," said Scrimgeour. "That does not make it the exclusive property of Mr. Potter, whatever Dumbledore may have decided." Scrimgeour scratched his badly shaven cheek, scrutinizing Harry. "Why do you think — ?"

"— Dumbledore wanted to give me the sword?" said Harry, struggling to keep his temper. "Maybe he thought it would look nice on my wall."

"This is not a joke, Potter!" growled Scrimgeour. "Was it because Dumbledore believed that only the sword of Godric Gryffindor could defeat the Heir of Slytherin? Did he wish to give you that sword,

Potter, because he believed, as do many, that you are the one destined to destroy He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

"Interesting theory," said Harry. "Has anyone ever tried sticking a sword in Voldemort? Maybe the Ministry should put some people onto that, instead of wasting their time stripping down Deluminators or covering up breakouts from Azkaban. So is this what you've been doing, Minister, shut up in your office, trying to break open a Snitch? People are dying — I was nearly one of them — Voldemort chased me across three counties, he killed Mad-Eye Moody, but there's been no word about any of that from the Ministry, has there? And you still expect us to cooperate with you!"

"You go too far!" shouted Scrimgeour, standing up; Harry jumped to his feet too. Scrimgeour limped toward Harry and jabbed him hard in the chest with the point of his wand: It singed a hole in Harry's T-shirt like a lit cigarette.

"Oi!" said Ron, jumping up and raising his own wand, but Harry said,

"No! D'you want to give him an excuse to arrest us?"

"Remembered you're not at school, have you?" said Scrimgeour, breathing hard into Harry's face. "Remembered that I am not Dumbledore, who forgave your insolence and insubordination? You may wear that scar like a crown, Potter, but it is not up to a seventeen-year-old boy to tell me how to do my job! It's time you learned some respect!"

"It's time you earned it," said Harry.

The floor trembled; there was a sound of running footsteps, then the door to the sitting room burst open and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley ran

in.

"We — we thought we heard —" began Mr. Weasley, looking thoroughly alarmed at the sight of Harry and the Minister virtually nose to nose.

"— raised voices," panted Mrs. Weasley.

Scrimgeour took a couple of steps back from Harry, glancing at the hole he had made in Harry's T-shirt. He seemed to regret his loss of temper.

"It — it was nothing," he growled. "I . . . regret your attitude," he said, looking Harry full in the face once more. "You seem to think that the Ministry does not desire what you — what Dumbledore — desired. We ought to be working together."

"I don't like your methods, Minister," said Harry. "Remember?"

For the second time, he raised his right fist and displayed to Scrimgeour the scars that still showed white on the back of it, spelling *I must not tell lies*. Scrimgeour's expression hardened. He turned away without another word and limped from the room. Mrs. Weasley hurried after him; Harry heard her stop at the back door. After a minute or so she called, "He's gone!"

"What did he want?" Mr. Weasley asked, looking around at Harry, Ron, and Hermione as Mrs. Weasley came hurrying back to them.

"To give us what Dumbledore left us," said Harry. "They've only just released the contents of his will."

Outside in the garden, over the dinner tables, the three objects Scrimgeour had given them were passed from hand to hand. Everyone exclaimed over the Deluminator and *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* and lamented the fact that Scrimgeour had refused to pass

on the sword, but none of them could offer any suggestion as to why Dumbledore would have left Harry an old Snitch. As Mr. Weasley examined the Deluminator for the third or fourth time, Mrs. Weasley said tentatively, "Harry, dear, everyone's awfully hungry, we didn't like to start without you. . . . Shall I serve dinner now?"

They all ate rather hurriedly and then, after a hasty chorus of "Happy Birthday" and much gulping of cake, the party broke up. Hagrid, who was invited to the wedding the following day, but was far too bulky to sleep in the overstretched Burrow, left to set up a tent for himself in a neighboring field.

"Meet us upstairs," Harry whispered to Hermione, while they helped Mrs. Weasley restore the garden to its normal state. "After everyone's gone to bed."

Up in the attic room, Ron examined his Deluminator, and Harry filled Hagrid's mokeskin purse, not with gold, but with those items he most prized, apparently worthless though some of them were: the Marauder's Map, the shard of Sirius's enchanted mirror, and R.A.B.'s locket. He pulled the strings tight and slipped the purse around his neck, then sat holding the old Snitch and watching its wings flutter feebly. At last, Hermione tapped on the door and tiptoed inside.

"*Muffliato,*" she whispered, waving her wand in the direction of the stairs.

"Thought you didn't approve of that spell?" said Ron.

"Times change," said Hermione. "Now, show us that Deluminator."

Ron obliged at once. Holding it up in front of him, he clicked it.

The solitary lamp they had lit went out at once.

"The thing is," whispered Hermione through the dark, "we could have achieved that with Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder."

There was a small *click,* and the ball of light from the lamp flew back to the ceiling and illuminated them all once more.

"Still, it's cool," said Ron, a little defensively. "And from what they said, Dumbledore invented it himself!"

"I know, but surely he wouldn't have singled you out in his will just to help us turn out the lights!"

"D'you think he knew the Ministry would confiscate his will and examine everything he'd left us?" asked Harry.

"Definitely," said Hermione. "He couldn't tell us in the will why he was leaving us these things, but that still doesn't explain . . ."

". . . why he couldn't have given us a hint when he was alive?" asked Ron.

"Well, exactly," said Hermione, now flicking through *The Tales of Beedle the Bard.* "If these things are important enough to pass on right under the nose of the Ministry, you'd think he'd have let us know why . . . unless he thought it was obvious?"

"Thought wrong, then, didn't he?" said Ron. "I always said he was mental. Brilliant and everything, but cracked. Leaving Harry an old Snitch — what the hell was that about?"

"I've no idea," said Hermione. "When Scrimgeour made you take it, Harry, I was so sure that something was going to happen!"

"Yeah, well," said Harry, his pulse quickening as he raised the Snitch in his fingers. "I wasn't going to try too hard in front of Scrimgeour, was I?"

"What do you mean?" asked Hermione.

"The Snitch I caught in my first ever Quidditch match?" said Harry. "Don't you remember?"

Hermione looked simply bemused. Ron, however, gasped, pointing frantically from Harry to the Snitch and back again until he found his voice.

"That was the one you nearly swallowed!"

"Exactly," said Harry, and with his heart beating fast, he pressed his mouth to the Snitch.

It did not open. Frustration and bitter disappointment welled up inside him: He lowered the golden sphere, but then Hermione cried out.

"Writing! There's writing on it, quick, look!"

He nearly dropped the Snitch in surprise and excitement. Hermione was quite right. Engraved upon the smooth golden surface, where seconds before there had been nothing, were five words written in the thin, slanting handwriting that Harry recognized as Dumbledore's:

I open at the close.

He had barely read them when the words vanished again.

"'I open at the close . . .' What's that supposed to mean?"

Hermione and Ron shook their heads, looking blank.

"I open at the close . . . at the *close* . . . I open at the close . . ."

But no matter how often they repeated the words, with many different inflections, they were unable to wring any more meaning

from them.

"And the sword," said Ron finally, when they had at last abandoned their attempts to divine meaning in the Snitch's inscription. "Why did he want Harry to have the sword?"

"And why couldn't he just have told me?" Harry said quietly. "It was *there*, it was right there on the wall of his office during all our talks last year! If he wanted me to have it, why didn't he just give it to me then?"

He felt as though he were sitting in an examination with a question he ought to have been able to answer in front of him, his brain slow and unresponsive. Was there something he had missed in the long talks with Dumbledore last year? Ought he to know what it all meant? Had Dumbledore expected him to understand?

"And as for this book," said Hermione, "*The Tales of Beedle the Bard* . . . I've never even heard of them!"

"You've never heard of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*?" said Ron incredulously. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not!" said Hermione in surprise. "Do you know them, then?"

"Well, of course I do!"

Harry looked up, diverted. The circumstance of Ron having read a book that Hermione had not was unprecedented. Ron, however, looked bemused by their surprise.

"Oh come on! All the old kids' stories are supposed to be Beedle's, aren't they? 'The Fountain of Fair Fortune' . . . 'The Wizard and the Hopping Pot' . . . 'Babbitty Rabbitty and her Cackling Stump' . . ."

"Excuse me?" said Hermione, giggling. "What was that last one?"

"Come off it!" said Ron, looking in disbelief from Harry to Hermione. "You must've heard of Babbitty Rabbitty —"

"Ron, you know full well Harry and I were brought up by Muggles!" said Hermione. "We didn't hear stories like that when we were little, we heard 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs' and 'Cinderella' —"

"What's that, an illness?" asked Ron.

"So these are children's stories?" asked Hermione, bending again over the runes.

"Yeah," said Ron uncertainly, "I mean, that's just what you hear, you know, that all these old stories came from Beedle. I dunno what they're like in the original versions."

"But I wonder why Dumbledore thought I should read them?"

Something creaked downstairs.

"Probably just Charlie, now Mum's asleep, sneaking off to regrow his hair," said Ron nervously.

"All the same, we should get to bed," whispered Hermione. "It wouldn't do to oversleep tomorrow."

"No," agreed Ron. "A brutal triple murder by the bridegroom's mother might put a bit of a damper on the wedding. I'll get the lights."

And he clicked the Deluminator once more as Hermione left the room.

Albus Dumbledore se Testament

Hy loop met 'n bergpad langs in die koel blou lug van dagbreek. Ver onder, toegewikkel in mis, is die skaduwee van 'n klein dorpie. Is die man na wie hy soek daar? Die man wat hy so desperaat nodig het dat hy skaars aan enigiets anders kan dink, die man met die antwoord, die antwoord op sy probleem . . .

"Hei, word wakker."

Harry maak sy oë oop. Hy lê weer op die kampbed in Ron se somber solderkamer. Die son het nog nie opgekom nie en die kamer is nog steeds skemerig. Pigwidgeon slaap met sy kop onder sy klein vlerkie. Die litteken op Harry se voorkop prik.

"Jy't in jou slaap gemompel."

"Het ek?"

"Ja. 'Gregorovitch.' Jy't aanhoudend 'Gregorovitch' gesê."

Harry het nie sy bril op nie; Ron se gesig lyk effens wasig.

"Wie's Gregorovitch?"

"Hoe sal ek weet? Jy's die een wat dit gesê het."

Harry vryf sy voorkop terwyl hy dink. Hy het 'n vae idee hy het die naam al voorheen gehoor, maar hy kan nie dink waar nie.

"Ek dink Voldemort soek na hom."

"Arme ou," sê Ron vurig.

Harry sit regop terwyl hy nog steeds sy litteken vryf; hy is nou wawyd wakker. Hy probeer onthou wat presies hy in die droom gesien het, maar al wat na hom toe terugkom, is 'n bergagtige horison en die buitelyne van die dorpie wat in 'n diep vallei genestel lê.

"Ek dink hy's oorsee."

"Wie, Gregorovitch?"

"Voldemort. Ek dink hy soek iewers in 'n ander land na Gregorovitch. Dit het nie soos hier in Brittanje gelyk nie."

"Dink jy jy't weer in sy kop ingesien?"

Ron klink bekommerd.

"Doen my 'n guns en moenie vir Hermione vertel nie," sê Harry.

"Alhoewel, ek weet nie hoe sy verwag ek moet ophou om goed in my slaap te sien nie . . ."

Hy kyk op na klein Pigwidgeon se hok en wonder . . . hoekom is die naam 'Gregorovitch' bekend?

"Ek dink," sê hy stadig, "hy het iets met Kwiddiek te doen. Daar's een of ander verband, maar ek kan nie – ek kan nie dink wat dit is nie."

"Kwiddiek?" vra Ron. "Is jy seker jy dink nie aan Gorgovitch nie?"

"Wie?"

"Dragomir Gorgovitch. Jaer, twee jaar gelede vir 'n rekordfooi na die Chudley Cannons toe oorgeloop. Rekordhouer vir die meeste Swelgerskepdoele in 'n seisoen."

"Nee," sê Harry. "Ek dink definitief nie aan Gorgovitch nie."

"Ek probeer dan ook nie," sê Ron. "Wel, geluk dan met jou verjaardag."

"Gits – dis reg, ek het vergeet. Ek's sewentien!"

Harry gryp die towerstaf wat langs sy kampbed lê, rig dit op die oorvol lessenaar waar hy sy bril gelos het en sê: "*Accio bril!*" Al is die bril net omtrent een tree weg, is dit geweldig bevredigend om te sien hoe dit na hom toe aangezoem kom, ten minste tot dit hom in die oog steek.

"Netjies," proes Ron.

Harry verlekker hom in die feit dat sy Spoor opgehef is en laat Ron se besittings in die kamer rondvlieg tot Pigwidgeon wakker word en opgewonde in sy hok rondfladder. Harry probeer ook sy tekkies se veters met towerkrag vasbind (dit vat daarna 'n hele paar minute om die knoop met die hand los te maak) en verander, net vir die plesier, die oranje klede in Ron se Chudley Cannons-plakkate na helderblou.

"As ek jy is, sal ek my gulp eerder met die hand toetrek," raai Ron aan en grinnik toe Harry dadelik kyk of syne toe is. "Hier's jou present. Maak dit hier oop; dis nie vir my ma se oë nie."

" 'n Boek?" sê Harry toe hy die reghoekige pakkie vat. "Breek bietjie met tradisie, nè?"

"Dis nie jou gewone boek nie," sê Ron. "Dis suiwer goud: *Twaalf Flatervrye Maniere om Hekse te Betower*. Verduidelik alles wat jy van meisies af moet weet. As ek dit net laas jaar gehad het, sou ek geweet het presies hoe om van Lavender ontslae te raak, en ek sou geweet het hoe om te werk te gegaan het met . . . Wel, Fred en George het vir my so 'n boek gegee en ek het baie geleer. Jy sal verbaas wees; dit gaan ook nie alles net oor towerstaftegniek nie."

Toe hulle in die kombuis kom, wag daar 'n stapel presente op die tafel. Bill en monsieur Delacour eet hulle ontbyt klaar terwyl mevrou Weasley oor die braaipan met hulle staan en gesels.

"Arthur het gesê ek moet jou gelukwens dat jy sewentien is, Harry," sê mevrou Weasley stralend vir hom. "Hy moes vroeg gaan werk, maar hy sal terug wees vir aandete. Dis ons present heel bo-op."

Harry kom sit, tel die vierkantige pakkie waarna sy gewys het op en maak dit oop. Binne-in is 'n horlosie baie soos die een wat meneer en mevrou Weasley vir Ron op sy sewentiende verjaardag gegee het; dit is van goud, met sterre in plaas van wysers wat in die rondte loop.

"Dis tradisioneel om vir 'n towenaar 'n horlosie te gee wanneer hy mondig word," sê mevrou Weasley wat hom angstig van die stoof af dophou. "Ek is bevrees daai een is nie nuut soos Ron s'n nie; dit was eintlik my broer Fabian s'n en hy was nie baie versigtig met sy besittings nie, en dis effens geduik aan die agterkant, maar –"

Die res van wat sy sê, gaan verlore; Harry het opgestaan en omhels haar nou. Hy probeer om met die omhelsing uitdrukking te gee aan baie ongesêde dinge en miskien verstaan sy dit, want sy tik sy wang onbeholpe toe hy haar los, swaai haar towerstaf half lukraak en veroorsaak dat 'n halwe pakkie spek uit die braaipan op die vloer val.

"Veels geluk, Harry!" sê Hermione wat vinnig by die kombuis inkom en haar present bo-op die stapel neersit. "Dis nie veel nie, maar ek hoop jy hou daarvan. Wat het jy vir hom gegee?" vra sy vir Ron wat haar blykbaar nie hoor nie.

"Komaan nou, maak Hermione s'n oop!" sê Ron.

Sy het vir hom 'n nuwe Loerskoop gekoop. Die ander pakkies bevat 'n towerskeermes van Bill en Fleur ("A ja, dit sal vir jou die gladste skeer ooit gee," verseker meneer Delacour hom, "maar jy moet uitdruklik sê wat jy wil 'ê . . . anders 'et jy dalk op die ou end 'n bietjie minder 'are as wat jy wil 'ê . . ."), sjokolade van die Delacours en 'n yslike boks met die jongste Weasley Wonderpoetsprodukte van Fred en George.

Harry, Ron en Hermione bly nie lank aan tafel nie, want toe madame Delacour, Fleur en Gabrielle daar aankom, word die kombuis ongemaklik vol.

"Ek sal dit vir jou gaan inpak," sê Hermione vrolik en neem Harry se presente uit sy arms toe die drie terug boontoe mik. "Ek's amper klaar; ek wag net dat die res van jou broeke uit die was kom, Ron –"

Ron se geproes word onderbreek toe 'n deur op die eerste verdieping se trapportaal oopgaan.

"Harry, kom gou hier."

Dit is Ginny. Ron gaan staan summier, maar Hermione kry hom aan die elmboog beet en trek hom by die trap op. Harry volg Ginny senuweeagtig by haar kamer in.

Hy was nog nooit hierbinne nie. Dit is klein, maar sonnig. Daar is 'n groot plakkaat van die towerpopgroep Die Skikgodinne teen een muur en 'n foto van Gwenog Jones, kaptein van die eksklusief-hekse se Kwiddiekspan, die Holyhead Harpies, teen die ander een. 'n Lessenaar by die oop venster kyk uit oor die boord waar hy en Ginny eenkeer twee-aan-'n-kant Kwiddiek teen Ron en Hermione gespeel het en waar daar nou 'n groot pêrelwit markiestent staan. Die goue vlag boaan is op dieselfde hoogte as Ginny se venster.

Ginny kyk op na Harry se gesig, asem diep in en sê: "Geluk, jy's sewentien."

"Ja . . . dankie."

Sy kyk hom stip aan, maar hy sukkel om terug te kyk; dit is soos om in 'n helder lig vas te kyk.

"Mooi uitsig," sê hy floutjies en wys na die venster.

Sy ignoreer dit. Hy kan haar nie kwalik neem nie.

"Ek kon nie dink wat om vir jou te gee nie," sê sy.

"Jy hoef nie vir my enigiets te gee nie."

Sy ignoreer dit ook.

"Ek het nie geweet wat sal nuttig wees nie. Niks te groot nie, want jy sal dit nie saam met jou kan vat nie."

Hy waag dit om na haar te kyk. Sy is nie tranerig nie; dit is een van die baie wonderlike dinge van Ginny, sy huil selde. Hy het al soms gedink die feit dat sy ses broers het, moet haar taai gemaak het.

Sy gee 'n tree nader aan hom.

"So toe het ek besluit ek gaan vir jou iets gee wat jou aan my sal laat dink, weet jy, as jy een of ander Veela ontmoet wanneer jy weg is om te doen wat jy ook al gaan doen."

"Ek dink nie daar gaan eintlik kans wees om iemand uit te neem nie, om eerlik te wees."

"Dis die silwer randjie waarna ek gesoek het," fluister sy en dan soen sy hom soos sy hom nog nooit gesoen het nie, en Harry soen haar terug en dis beter as Vuurwhisky; hy is salig onbewus van enigiets anders: sy is die enigste realiteit in die wêreld: Ginny, hoe sy voel, met sy hand op haar rug en die ander een in haar lang hare wat so soet ruik –

Die deur bars agter hulle oop en hulle spring uitmekaar.

"O," sê Ron spitsvondig. "Ekskuus."

"Ron!" Hermione is net agter hom, effens uitasem. Daar is 'n gespanne stilte, dan sê Ginny in 'n toonlose stemmetjie: "Wel, geluk met jou verjaardag, Harry."

Ron se ore is pers; Hermione lyk senuweeagtig. Harry wil die deur in hulle gesigte toeklap, maar dit voel asof 'n koue trek by die kamer ingekom het toe die deur oopgemaak is en sy blink oomblik het soos 'n seepbel gebars. Al die redes hoekom hy sy verhouding met Ginny moet verbreek, hoekom hy ver van haar af moet wegbly, het op 'n manier saam met Ron by die kamer ingesluip en al die heerlike vergetelheid is verby.

Hy kyk na Ginny en wil iets sê, al weet hy beswaarlik wat, maar sy het haar rug op hom gedraai. Hy dink sy het dalk aan trane toegegee, maar voor Ron kan hy niks doen om haar te troos nie.

"Ek sien jou later," sê hy en volg die ander twee by die kamer uit.

Ron loop ondertoe, deur die steeds oorvol kombuis en uit werf toe; Harry bly die hele tyd op sy hakke en Hermione trippel met 'n bang uitdrukking agter hulle aan.

Toe hulle by die pas gesnyde grasperk kom waar dit privaat is, vlieg Ron Harry in.

"Jy't haar gelos. Wat doen jy nou? Hoekom mors jy nou met haar rond?"

"Ek mors nie met haar rond nie," sê Harry net toe Hermione hulle inhaal.

"Ron –"

Maar Ron lig 'n hand om haar stil te maak.

"Sy was 'n wrak toe jy haar gelos het –"

"Ek ook. Jy weet hoekom ek dit gestop het, en dit was nie omdat ek wou nie."

"Ja, maar noudat jy weer met haar gevry het, sal sy net weer begin hoop –"

"Sy's nie 'n idioot nie; sy weet dit kan nie gebeur nie; sy verwag nie dat ons – eendag moet trou, of –"

Terwyl hy dit sê, vorm daar 'n duidelike prentjie in Harry se kop van Ginny wat in 'n wit rok trou met 'n lang, gesiglose, onaangename vreemdeling. Dit tref hom binne 'n duiselingwekkende oomblik: haar toekoms is vry en ongebonde terwyl syne . . . Al wat hy vorentoe sien, is Voldemort.

"As jy haar aanhou vasdruk elke slag dat jy 'n kans kry –"

"Dit sal nie weer gebeur nie," sê Harry bars. Die dag is wolkloos, maar hy voel of die son verdwyn het. "Oukei?"

Ron lyk half gegrief, half verleë; hy wieg vir 'n oomblik heen en weer op sy voete en sê dan: "Reg dan; wel, dis . . . oukei."

Ginny probeer die res van die dag nie om alleen saam met Harry iewers te wees nie; sy laat ook nie met enige kyk of gebaar blyk dat hulle meer as net 'n beleefde gesprek in haar kamer gedeel het nie. Charlie se koms is nogtans vir Harry 'n verligting. Dit is darem afleiding om te kyk hoe mevrou Weasley Charlie dwing om op 'n stoel te sit, haar towerstaf dreigend lig en aankondig dat sy hare nou ordentlik geknip gaan word.

Aangesien Harry se verjaardagete Die Konynenes se kombuis selfs voor Charlie, Lupin, Tonks en Hagrid se aankoms uit sy nate sou laat bars het, word 'n hele paar tafels kop aan kop in die tuin neergesit. Fred en George tower 'n paar pers lanterns op wat elkeen met 'n groot nommer "17" versier is en in die lug bokant die gaste hang. Danksy mevrou Weasley se versorging is George se wond netjies en skoon, maar Harry is nog nie gewoond aan die donker gat aan die kant van sy kop nie, al maak die tweeling hoeveel grappe daaroor.

Hermione laat pers en goue papierlinte voor by haar towerstaf uitskiet en hulle drapeer hulle vanself kunstig oor die bome en bosse.

"Oulik," sê Ron toe Hermione met een laaste swiep van haar towerstaf die suurappelboom se blare in goud verander. "Jy't regtig 'n oog vir daai soort ding."

"Dankie, Ron!" sê Hermione wat terselfdertyd gevlei en 'n bietjie verward lyk. Harry draai weg en glimlag by homself. Hy het so 'n spesmaas hy gaan 'n hoofstuk oor komplimente kry as hy tyd kry om deur sy eksemplaar van *Twaalf Flatervrye Maniere om Hekse te Betower* te blaai; hy tref Ginny se oog en grinnik vir haar voor hy sy belofte aan Ron onthou en haastig 'n gesprek met meneer Delacour aanknoop.

"Uit die pad, uit die pad uit!" sing mevrou Weasley terwyl sy deur die hek beweeg met iets wat voor haar sweef: dit lyk soos 'n reusagtige Snip so groot soos 'n strandbal. Sekondes later besef Harry dit is sy verjaardagkoek wat mevrou Weasley met haar towerstaf in die lug laat hang omdat sy dit nie wil waag om dit oor die ongelyke grond te dra nie. Toe die koek uiteindelik in die middel van die tafel land, sê Harry: "Dit lyk wonderlik, mevrou Weasley."

"Og, dis niks nie, skat," sê sy liefdevol. Ron wys oor haar skouer vir Harry sy duim en vorm geluidloos die woorde *Goeie een.*

Teen sewe-uur is al die gaste daar. Fred en George het hulle by die einde van die laan ingewag en huis toe begelei. Hagrid het hom

vir die okkasie opgetof deur sy beste en afgryslikste harige bruin pak aan te trek. Al glimlag Lupin toe hy Harry se hand skud, dink Harry hy lyk effens ongelukkig. Dit is baie vreemd, want Tonks langs hom lyk eenvoudig stralend.

"Geluk met jou verjaardag, Harry," sê sy en gee hom 'n stywe drukkie.

"Sewentien, hè!" sê Hagrid terwyl hy 'n emmergroot glas wyn by Fred aanvat. "Dis op die dag na ses jaar vandat ons mekaar ontmoet het, Harry, onthou jy dit?"

"Vaagweg," sê Harry en grynslag op na hom. "Het jy nie die voordeur afgebreek en vir Dudley 'n varkstert gegee en vir my vertel ek's 'n towenaar nie?"

"Ek't die detail al bietjie vergeet," grinnik Hagrid. "Als reg, Ron, Hermione?"

"Ons is piekfyn" sê Hermione. "Hoe gaan dit met jou?"

"Ag, nie te vrot nie. Besig gewees; ons het pasgebore eenhorinkies; ek sal julle wys wanneer julle terugkom –" Harry vermy Ron en Hermione se oë terwyl Hagrid in sy sak krap. "Hier, Harry – kon nie dink wat om vir jou te kry nie, maar toe onthou ek hiervan." Hy haal 'n klein, pelserige toetreksakkie uit; dit het 'n lang tou aan en is duidelik bedoel om om die nek gedra te word. "Molvel. Steek enigiets daarin weg en niemand behalwe die eienaar kan dit uitkry nie. Die goed is baie skaars."

"Dankie, Hagrid!"

"'s niks," sê Hagrid en waai 'n hand so groot soos 'n vullisdrom se deksel. "En daar's Charlie! Nog altyd van hom gehou – Hei, Charlie!"

Charlie kom nader en trek sy hand droewig deur sy hare wat so pas brutaal kort gesny is. Hy is korter as Ron, geset en met 'n paar brandmerke en krapplekke op sy gespierde arms.

"Haai, Hagrid, hoe lyk dinge?"

"Wil al eeue lank vir jou skryf. Hoe gaan dit met Norbert?"

"Norbert?" Charlie lag. "Die Noorweegse Rifrug? Ons noem haar nou Norberta."

"Wat? Is Norbert 'n meisie?"

"O ja," sê Charlie.

"Hoe weet mens dit?" vra Hermione.

"Hulle's baie kwaaier," sê Charlie. Hy kyk oor sy skouer en laat sak sy stem. "Wens Pa wil nou gou maak en kom. Ma raak gestres."

Hulle kyk almal na mevrou Weasley. Sy probeer met madame Delacour gesels terwyl sy aanhoudend hek toe loer.

"Ek dink ons moet maar sonder Arthur begin," kondig sy ná 'n

oomblik of twee vir die hele tuin aan. "Daar's seker 'n oponthoud by [illegible]o!"

Hulle sien dit almal terselfdertyd: 'n ligstraal vlieg oor die werf en tot op die tafel waar dit verander in 'n heldersilwer wesel wat op sy agterpote staan en in meneer Weasley se stem praat.

"Die Minister van Towerkuns kom saam met my."

Die Patronus verdamp in die lug. Fleur se familie staar in ongeloof na die plek waar dit verdwyn het.

"Ons moet liewer nie hier wees nie," sê Lupin dadelik. "Harry – ek's jammer – ek sal 'n ander keer verduidelik –"

Hy gryp Tonks se gewrig en trek haar weg; hulle bereik die heining, klim oor en verdwyn. Mevrou Weasley lyk verward.

"Die Minister – maar hoekom –? Ek verstaan nie –"

Maar daar is nie tyd om die saak te bespreek nie; 'n sekonde later verskyn meneer Weasley uit die niet by die hek, vergesel deur Rufus Scrimgeour wat dadelik aan sy grys bos hare herken word.

Die twee nuwe aankomelinge marsjeer oor die werf na die tuin en die lanternverligte tafel toe waar almal stil kyk hoe hulle nader kom. Toe Scrimgeour in die lanternlig kom, sien Harry hy lyk baie ouer as die vorige keer toe hulle mekaar ontmoet het; net vel en been, en stroef.

"Jammer om te steur," sê Scrimgeour en kom met 'n hinkepink voor die tafel tot stilstand. "Veral aangesien ek kan sien ek daag ongenooid by 'n partytjie op."

Sy oë rus vir 'n oomblik op die reusagtige Snipkoek.

"Nog baie jare."

"Dankie," sê Harry.

"Ek wil graag 'n woordjie eenkant met jou wissel," vervolg Scrimgeour. "Asook met meneer Ronald Weasley en juffrou Hermione Granger."

"Ons?" vra Ron en klink verbaas. "Hoekom ons?"

"Ek sal julle inlig wanneer ons iewers meer privaat is," sê Scrimgeour. "Is daar so 'n plek hier?" vra hy vir meneer Weasley.

"Ja, natuurlik," sê meneer Weasley wat senuweeagtig lyk. "Die, e, sitkamer; hoekom gebruik julle dit nie?"

"Stap julle voor," sê Scrimgeour vir Ron. "Jy hoef ons nie te vergesel nie, Arthur."

Harry sien hoe kyk meneer Weasley bekommerd na mevrou Weasley toe hy, Ron en Hermione opstaan. Terwyl hulle in stilte vooruit na die huis toe loop, weet Harry die ander twee dink aan dieselfde ding as hy: Scrimgeour moet op 'n manier uitgevind het hulle drie beplan om nie terug Hogwarts toe te gaan nie.

Scrimgeour praat nie terwyl hulle deur die wanordelike kombuis na Die Konynenes se sitkamer toe beweeg nie. Hoewel die tuin vol sagte goue aandlug is, is dit reeds donker hierbinne; toe hulle inkom, swaai Harry sy towerstaf na die olielampe en hulle verlig die slordige maar gesellige vertrek. Scrimgeour maak hom tuis op die uitgesakte leunstoel wat meneer Weasley gewoonlik beset en Harry, Ron en Hermione moet langs mekaar op die rusbank indruk. Sodra hulle sit, praat Scrimgeour.

"Ek het 'n paar vrae vir julle drie en ek dink dit sal die beste wees as ons dit individueel doen. Julle twee," hy wys na Harry en Hermione, "kan bo gaan wag. Ek sal met Ronald begin."

"Ons gaan nêrens nie," sê Harry terwyl Hermione heftig knik. "U kan met ons saam praat, of glad nie."

Scrimgeour kyk Harry koud en ondersoekend aan. Harry kry die indruk dat die Minister wonder of dit die moeite werd is om so vroeg in die gesprek al openlik vyandig te wees.

"Nou goed dan, saam," sê hy en haal sy skouers op. Hy maak sy keel skoon. "Ek is hier, soos ek seker is julle weet, oor Albus Dumbledore se testament."

Harry, Ron en Hermione kyk na mekaar.

"Julle is blykbaar verras! Het julle dan nie geweet dat Dumbledore iets aan julle nagelaat het nie?"

"Aan a – almal van ons?" vra Ron. "Vir my en Hermione ook?"

"Ja, aan almal van –"

Maar Harry val hom in die rede.

"Dumbledore is meer as 'n maand gelede dood. Hoekom het dit so lank geneem om die bemaking vir ons te gee?"

"Dis tog duidelik," sê Hermione voor Scrimgeour kan antwoord. "Hulle wou wat ook al aan ons bemaak is eers ondersoek. Julle het geen reg gehad om dit te doen nie!" sê sy en haar stem bewe effens.

"Ek het alle reg gehad," sê Scrimgeour minagtend. "Die Dekreet vir Regverdigbare Konfiskering gee die Ministerie die mag om 'n testament se inhoud te konfiskeer –"

"Daardie wet is geskep om te keer dat towenaars Donker artefakte aan ander bemaak," sê Hermione, "en die Ministerie is veronderstel om klinkklare bewyse te hê dat die oorledene se besittings onwettig is voor hulle daarop beslag lê! Wil u vir my sê u het gedink Dumbledore het iets wat vervloek is aan ons probeer agterlaat?"

"Beplan jy 'n loopbaan in Towerwetgewing, juffrou Granger?" vra Scrimgeour.

"Nee," kap Hermione terug. "Ek hoop om iets goeds te doen in die wêreld!"

Ron lag. Scrimgeour se oë flikker na hom toe en dan weer weg toe Harry praat.

"So hoekom het u besluit ons kan ons goed nou kry? Kan u nie dink aan 'n verskoning om dit te hou nie?"

"Nee, dis natuurlik omdat die een-en-dertig dae verstreke is," sê Hermione dadelik. "Hulle kan goed nie veel langer as dit hou as hulle nie kan bewys dis gevaarlik nie. Reg?"

"Sou jy sê jy was na aan Dumbledore, Ronald?" vra Scrimgeour en ignoreer Hermione. Ron lyk verras.

"Ek? Nee – nie regtig nie . . . Dit was altyd Harry wat . . ."

Ron kyk skuinsweg na Harry en Hermione en sien Hermione gee vir hom 'n *hou-jou-mond!* soort kyk, maar die skade is gedoen: Scrimgeour lyk asof hy presies gehoor het wat hy verwag het en ook graag wou hoor. Hy duik soos 'n roofvoël op Ron se antwoord neer.

"As jy nie baie na aan Dumbledore was nie, hoe verklaar jy die feit dat hy in sy testament aan jou gedink het? Hy het buitengewoon min persoonlike bemakings gemaak. Die oorgrote meerderheid van sy besittings – sy privaat biblioteek, sy towerinstrumente en ander persoonlike eiendom – is aan Hogwarts nagelaat. Hoekom dink jy is jy uitgesonder?"

"Ek . . . weet nie," sê Ron. "Ek . . . as ek sê ons was nie na aan mekaar nie . . . Ek bedoel, ek dink hy't van my gehou . . ."

"Jy's net beskeie, Ron," sê Hermione. "Dumbledore was baie erg oor jou."

Sy rek die waarheid nou tot breekpunt toe; sover Harry weet, was Ron en Dumbledore nooit alleen saam nie en was daar bitter min direkte kontak tussen hulle. Dit lyk egter nie of Scrimgeour luister nie. Hy steek sy hand in sy mantel en haal 'n toetreksak wat baie groter is as die een wat Hagrid vir Harry gegee het, uit. Hy haal 'n perkamentrol daaruit, rol dit oop en begin hardop lees.

"*'Die Laaste Wil en Testament van Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore'* . . . ja, hier is dit . . . *'aan Ronald Bilius Weasley bemaak ek my Afskakelaar in die hoop dat hy my sal onthou wanneer hy dit gebruik.'* "

Scrimgeour haal 'n voorwerp wat Harry al voorheen gesien het uit die sak: dit lyk soos 'n silwer sigaretaansteker, maar hy weet dit het die mag om met 'n eenvoudige klik alle lig uit 'n plek te suig, en dit weer met 'n klik terug te besorg. Scrimgeour leun vorentoe en gee die Afskakelaar vir Ron wat dit vat en dit verstom tussen sy vingers ronddraai.

"Dit is 'n waardevolle voorwerp," sê Scrimgeour terwyl hy Ron

dophou. "Dit mag selfs uniek wees. Dit is beslis Dumbledore se eie ontwerp. Hoekom sou hy so 'n seldsame item aan jou nagelaat het?"

Ron skud sy kop en lyk verward.

"Dumbledore moes duisende studente onderrig het," hou Scrimgeour vol. "Nogtans is die enigste drie wat hy in sy testament onthou het julle drie. Hoekom? Waarvoor het hy gedink sal jy sy Afskakelaar gebruik, meneer Weasley?"

"Seker om ligte mee af te sit," mompel Ron. "Wat anders kan ek daarmee doen?"

Scrimgeour het duidelik nie enige voorstelle nie. Hy beloer Ron nog vir 'n oomblik of twee, dan wend hy hom weer tot Dumbledore se testament.

" '*Aan mejuffrou Hermione Jean Granger bemaak ek my eksemplaar van* Die Verhale van Beedle die Skrywer *in die hoop dat sy dit baie vermaaklik en insiggewend sal vind.*' "

Scrimgeour haal nou 'n klein boekie wat so antiek soos die eksemplaar van *Geheime van die Donkerste Kuns* bo in Ron se kamer lyk, uit die sak. Die band is gevlek en dop plek-plek af. Hermione vat dit by Scrimgeour sonder om 'n woord te sê. Sy hou die boek in haar skoot en staar daarna. Harry sien die titel is in Rune-taal; hy het dit nog nooit leer lees nie. Terwyl hy kyk, spat 'n traan op die gebosseleerde simbole.

"Hoekom dink jy het Dumbledore daardie boek vir jou nagelaat, juffrou Granger?" vra Scrimgeour.

"Hy . . . hy't geweet ek hou van boeke," sê Hermione in 'n skor stem en vee haar oë met haar mou af.

"Maar hoekom hierdie spesifieke boek?"

"Ek weet nie. Hy moet gedink het ek sal daarvan hou."

"Het jy ooit kodes of enige manier om geheime boodskappe oor te dra met Dumbledore bespreek?"

"Nee, ek het nie," sê Hermione wat haar oë nog steeds aan haar mou afvee. "En as die Ministerie in een-en-dertig dae niks geheime kodes in die boek gekry het nie, twyfel ek of ek sal."

Sy onderdruk 'n snik. Hulle sit so styf teen mekaar gedruk dat Ron sukkel om sy arm uit te kry sodat hy dit om Hermione se skouers kan sit. Scrimgeour wend hom weer tot die testament.

" '*Aan Harry James Potter,*' " lees hy en Harry se ingewande trek skielik opgewonde saam, " '*bemaak ek die Snip wat hy in sy eerste Kwiddiekwedstryd by Hogwarts gevang het ter herinnering aan die beloning vir volharding en vaardigheid.*' "

Toe Scrimgeour die klein okkerneutgroot goue balletjie uithaal,

fladder die silwer vlerke flouerig en Harry kan nie help om te voel dit is 'n groot antiklimaks nie.

"Hoekom het Dumbledore hierdie Snip aan jou bemaak?" vra Scrimgeour.

"G'n idee nie," sê Harry. "Seker oor die redes wat u nou net voorgelees het . . . Om my te herinner aan wat mens kan regkry as jy . . . volhard en wat dit ook al was."

"Jy dink dus dit is bloot 'n simboliese soewenier?"

"Seker," sê Harry. "Wat anders kan dit wees?"

"Ek vra die vrae," sê Scrimgeour en skuif sy stoel effens nader aan die rusbank. Dit word nou al skemer buite; deur die vensters troon die markiestent spookagtig wit bo die heining uit.

"Ek merk jou verjaardagkoek is in die vorm van 'n Snip," sê Scrimgeour vir Harry. "Hoekom?"

Hermione lag spottend.

"O, dit kan nie verwys na die feit dat Harry 'n briljante Soeker is nie; dis te ooglopend," sê sy. "Daar moet 'n geheime boodskap van Dumbledore in die versiersuiker weggesteek wees!"

"Ek dink nie daar is enigiets in die versiersuiker weggesteek nie," sê Scrimgeour, "maar 'n Snip sal 'n baie goeie wegsteekplek vir 'n klein voorwerp wees. Ek is seker julle weet hoekom?"

Harry haal sy skouers op, maar Hermione antwoord. Harry dink dit is al so 'n ingewortelde gewoonte van haar om vrae reg te beantwoord dat sy die drang nie kan onderdruk nie.

"Want 'n Snip het 'n vleesgeheue," sê sy.

"Wat?" sê Harry en Ron saam; albei beskou Hermione se kennis van Kwiddiek as beroerd.

"Korrek," sê Scrimgeour. "'n Snip word nie met die kaal hand aangeraak voor dit vrygelaat word nie, selfs die een wat dit maak, dra handskoene. Dit is betower sodat dit die eerste mens wat daaraan raak, kan identifiseer in geval van 'n omstrede vangs. Hierdie Snip," hy hou die klein goue balletjie in die lug op, "sal jou aanraking onthou, Potter. Dit is myns insiens moontlik dat Dumbledore, wat oor geweldige towerkragvaardighede beskik het, ongeag sy ander foute, hierdie Snip moontlik kon betower het sodat dit net vir jou sal oopgaan."

Harry se hart klop nou redelik vinnig. Hy is seker Scrimgeour is reg. Hoe kan hy keer dat hy die Snip met kaal hande by die Minister neem?

"Jy sê niks nie," sê Scrimgeour. "Miskien weet jy reeds wat die Snip bevat?"

"Nee," sê Harry en wonder nog steeds hoe hy dit kan laat lyk

asof hy aan die Snip vat sonder dat hy dit werklik doen. As hy net goed was met Legilimensie, regtig goed, en Hermione se gedagtes kon lees; hy kan omtrent hoor hoe gons haar brein hier langs hom.

"Vat dit," sê Scrimgeour sag.

Harry kyk in die Minister se geel oë en weet hy het nie 'n keuse nie; hy moet dit doen. Hy hou sy hand uit en Scrimgeour leun weer vorentoe en sit die Snip stadig en doelbewus op Harry se handpalm neer.

Niks gebeur nie. Toe Harry se vingers om die Snip toevou, hou die moeë vlerke op fladder en kom tot stilstand. Scrimgeour, Ron en Hermione staar nog steeds gretig na die balletjie wat nou gedeeltelik versteek is asof hulle hoop dit gaan op 'n manier transformeer.

"Dit was dramaties," sê Harry koel. Ron en Hermione lag albei.

"Is dit dan al?" vra Hermione en maak reg om uit die rusbank op te staan.

"Nie heeltemal nie," sê Scrimgeour wat nou in 'n slegte bui lyk. "Dumbledore het 'n tweede erflating aan jou bemaak, Potter."

"Wat is dit?" vra Harry wat nou weer opgewonde raak.

Scrimgeour doen nie hierdie keer die moeite om die testament te lees nie.

"Godric Gryffindor se swaard," sê hy.

Hermione en Ron verstyf al twee. Harry kyk rond vir 'n teken van die hef met die ingelegde robyne, maar Scrimgeour haal nie die swaard uit die sak wat in elk geval ver te klein lyk om dit te bevat nie.

"So waar is dit?" vra Harry agterdogtig.

"Ongelukkig," sê Scrimgeour, "was Dumbledore nie by magte om daardie swaard weg te gee nie. Godric Gryffindor se swaard is 'n belangrike historiese artefak en as sodanig behoort dit –"

"Dit behoort aan Harry!" sê Hermione vurig. "Dit het hom gekies; hy is die een wat dit gekry het; dit het uit die Sorteerhoed na hom toe gekom –"

"Volgens betroubare geskiedkundige bronne kan die swaard hom aan enige waardige inwoner van Gryffindor oorhandig," sê Scrimgeour. "Dit beteken nie dit is meneer Potter se eksklusiewe eiendom nie, wat Dumbledore ook al mag besluit het." Scrimgeour krap sy slordig geskeerde wang en hou Harry fyn dop. "Wat dink jy –"

"Dumbledore wou die swaard vir my gee!" sê Harry en sukkel om sy humeur te beteuel. "Miskien het hy gedink dit sal mooi teen my muur lyk."

"Dis nie 'n grap nie, Potter!" brul Scrimgeour. "Was dit omdat Dumbledore gedink het slegs Godric Gryffindor se swaard kan Sly-

therin se erfgenaam verslaan? Wou hy daardie swaard vir jou wat Potter is, gee omdat hy net soos soveel ander geglo het jy is die een wat bestem is om Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie te vernietig?"

"Interessante teorie," sê Harry. "Het enigiemand al ooit probeer om 'n swaard in Voldemort te steek? Miskien moet die Ministerie 'n paar mense kry om dit te doen pleks van hulle tyd te mors om Afsluitklaars uitmekaar te haal of ontsnappings uit Azkaban toe te smeer. So is dit wat u gedoen het terwyl u in u kantoor toegesluit was, Minister? Het u 'n Snip probeer oopbreek? Mense gaan dood, ek was amper een van hulle; Voldemort het my oor drie lande heen rondgejaag, hy het Maloog Moody vermoor, maar die Ministerie sê nie 'n woord oor enigiets daarvan nie! En u verwag nog steeds ons moet saam met u werk!"

"Jy gaan te ver!" skree Scrimgeour en staan op; Harry spring ook op. Scrimgeour hinkepink tot by Harry en steek hom hard met sy towerstaf se punt op die borskas: dit skroei 'n gat in Harry se T-hemp asof dit 'n brandende sigaret is.

"Hei!" sê Ron wat opspring en sy towerstaf lig, maar Harry sê: "Nee! Wil jy hom 'n verskoning gee om ons te arresteer?"

"Onthou skielik jy is nie by die skool nie, nè?" sê Scrimgeour wat hard in Harry se gesig asemhaal. "Onthou skielik ek is nie Dumbledore wat jou astrantheid en ongehoorsaamheid sal vergewe nie? Jy dra miskien daardie litteken soos 'n kroon, Potter, maar ek sal nie dat 'n sewentienjarige seun vir my voorsê hoe om my werk te doen nie! Dis tyd dat jy respek leer!"

"Dis tyd dat u dit leer verdien," sê Harry.

Die vloer bewe; daar is 'n geluid van voetstappe wat aangehardloop kom, dan bars die sitkamerdeur oop en meneer en mevrou Weasley storm in.

"Ons – ons dog ons hoor –" begin meneer Weasley en lyk lelik bekommerd toe hy Harry en die Minister feitlik neus teen neus sien.

"– harde stemme," hyg mevrou Weasley.

Scrimgeour gee 'n paar tree terug van Harry af en kyk vlugtig na die gat wat hy in Harry se T-hemp gemaak het. Hy lyk jammer dat hy sy humeur verloor het.

"Dit – dit was niks nie," grom hy. "Ek . . . betreur jou houding," sê hy en kyk Harry weer vol in die gesig. "Jy dink blykbaar die Ministerie se doelwitte is nie dieselfde as joune – en Dumbledore – s'n nie. Ons behoort saam te werk."

"Ek hou nie van u metodes nie, Minister," sê Harry. "Onthou u?"

Hy lig sy regtervuis en wys vir Scrimgeour die littekens wat nog steeds wit agterop uitstaan en *Ek mag nie leuens vertel nie* uitspel.

Scrimgeour se uitdrukking verhard. Hy draai sonder 'n verdere woord weg en hinkepink by die vertrek uit. Mevrou Weasley skarrel agter hom aan. Harry hoor haar by die agterdeur stop. Ná 'n minuut of so roep sy uit: "Hy's weg!"

"Wat wou hy hê?" vra meneer Weasley en kyk na Harry, Ron en Hermione terwyl mevrou Weasley haar na hulle toe terughaas.

"Om vir ons te gee wat Dumbledore aan ons bemaak het," sê Harry. "Hulle het sy testament se inhoud nou eers beskikbaar gestel."

Buite in die tuin word die drie voorwerpe wat Scrimgeour vir hulle gegee het oor die tafel van hand tot hand aangegee. Almal gee uitroepe oor die Afskakelaar en *Die Verhale van Beedle die Skrywer* en betreur die feit dat Scrimgeour geweier het om die swaard te gee, maar niemand kan dink hoekom Dumbledore vir Harry 'n ou Snip agtergelaat het nie. Terwyl meneer Weasley die Afskakelaar vir die derde of vierde keer bestudeer, sê mevrou Weasley versigtig: "Harry, skat, almal is vreeslik honger; ons wou nie sonder jou begin nie . . . Kan ek nou maar die aandete voorsit?"

Hulle eet almal half haastig en dan, ná 'n vinnige koor van "Veels geluk" en baie happe koek is die partytjie op 'n einde. Hagrid, wat na die volgende dag se troue toe genooi is, maar gans te lywig is om in die oorvol Konynenes te slaap, verkas om vir hom 'n tent in die veld langsaan te gaan opslaan.

"Ontmoet ons bo," fluister Harry vir Hermione terwyl hulle mevrou Weasley help om die tuin weer normaal te laat lyk. "Ná almal bed toe is."

Bo in die solderkamer bekyk Ron die Afskakelaar en Harry maak Hagrid se Molvelsak vol: nie met goud nie, maar met die besittings waaraan hy die meeste waarde heg, al lyk party daarvan oënskynlik waardeloos: die Plunderaar se Kaart, die skerf van Sirius se betowerde spieël en R.A.B. se hangertjie. Hy trek die toutjies styf en hang die sakkie om sy nek, dan sit en hou hy die ou Snip vas en kyk hoe sy vlerke flou fladder. Uiteindelik klop Hermione sag aan die deur en kom op haar tone in. "*Muffliato,*" fluister sy en waai haar towerstaf in die rigting van die trap.

"Dog jy't iets teen daai towerspreuk?" sê Ron.

"Tye verander," sê Hermione. "Nou toe, wys vir my daai Afskakelaar."

Ron maak dadelik so. Hy hou dit voor hom op en klik dit. Die enigste lamp wat hulle aanhet, gaan dadelik dood.

"Die ding is," fluister Hermione in die donker, "ons kon dit met Peruaanse Kitsdonker Poeier reggekry het."

Daar is 'n sagte *klik* en die balletjie lig uit die lamp vlieg terug plafon toe en verlig hulle almal weer.

"Nogtans, dis cool," sê Ron effens verdedigend. "En volgens wat hulle sê, het Dumbledore dit self ontwerp!"

"Ek weet, maar hy sou jou tog sekerlik nie in sy testament uitgesonder het net om ons te help om ligte af te sit nie!"

"Dink julle hy't geweet die Ministerie sal sy testament konfiskeer en alles wat hy aan ons bemaak het eers ondersoek?" vra Harry.

"Definitief," sê Hermione. "Hy kon nie vir ons in sy testament vertel hoekom hy daardie goed aan ons agtergelaat het nie, maar dit verklaar nog steeds nie . . ."

". . . hoekom hy nie vir ons 'n wenk kon gegee het toe hy nog gelewe het nie?" vra Ron.

"Presies," sê Hermione wat nou vinnig deur *Die Verhale van Beedle die Skrywer* blaai. "As hierdie goed belangrik genoeg is om dit reg onder die Ministerie se neus vir ons na te laat, sal mens dink hy sou vir ons gesê het hoekom . . . behalwe as hy gedink het dis duidelik?"

"Wel, dan het hy verkeerd gedink, nè?" sê Ron. "Ek het altyd gesê hy's mal. Briljant en alles, maar getik. Om vir Harry 'n ou Snip agter te laat – wat de hel is dit voor?"

"Nie die vaagste idee nie," sê Hermione. "Toe Scrimgeour jou gedwing het om dit te vat, Harry, was ek so seker iets gaan daarmee gebeur!"

"Ja, wel," sê Harry en sy polsslag versnel toe hy die Snip in sy vingers oplig. "Ek wou nie te hard voor Scrimgeour probeer nie."

"Wat bedoel jy?" vra Hermione.

"Die Snip wat ek in my heel eerste Kwiddiekwedstryd gevang het," sê Harry. "Onthou julle nie?"

Hermione lyk heeltemal verward, maar Ron snak na asem en wys koorsagtig van Harry na die Snip en weer terug tot hy sy stem terugkry.

"Dit was die een wat jy amper ingesluk het!"

"Presies," sê Harry en met 'n hart wat vinnig klop, druk hy sy mond teen die Snip.

Dit gaan nie oop nie. Frustrasie en bitter teleurstelling wel in hom op: hy laat sak die goue balletjie, maar dan gil Hermione.

"Daar's op geskryf! Gou, kyk, daar's op geskryf!"

Hy laat val die Snip amper, so verbaas en opgewonde is hy. Hermione is heeltemal reg. Gegraveer op die gladde goue oppervlak waar daar sekondes vantevore niks was nie, is daar vyf woorde geskryf in die dun, skuins handskrif wat Harry as Dumbledore s'n herken.

Ek ontsluit met die sluiting.

Hy het dit skaars gelees of die woorde verdwyn weer.

"'*Ek ontsluit met die sluiting . . .*' Wat's dit veronderstel om te beteken?"

Hermione en Ron skud hul koppe en lyk uitdrukkingloos.

"Ek ontsluit met die sluiting . . . met die *sluiting* . . . ek open met die sluiting . . ."

Maar dit maak nie saak hoeveel keer en met hoeveel verskillende infleksies hulle die woorde herhaal nie, hulle kan nie enige verdere betekenis uit die woorde wring nie.

"En die swaard?" vra Ron later toe hulle uiteindelik ophou om te probeer raai wat die Snip se inskripsie beteken. "Hoekom wou hy hê Harry moes die swaard kry?"

"En hoekom kon hy my dit nie net gesê het nie?" sê Harry sag. "Dit was *daar*; dit was daar teen sy kantoor se muur elke keer dat ek hom laas jaar gaan sien het! As hy wou gehad het ek moet dit kry, hoekom het hy dit nie toe net vir my gegee nie?"

Hy voel asof hy eksamen skryf en sukkel met 'n vraag wat hy behoort te kan beantwoord, maar sy brein bly stadig en reageer nie. Is daar iets wat hom ontgaan het tydens al verlede jaar se lang gesprekke met Dumbledore? Behoort hy te weet wat dit alles beteken? Het Dumbledore verwag hy moet verstaan?

"En wat hierdie boek betref," sê Hermione, "*Die Verhale van Beedle die Skrywer* . . . Ek het nog nooit eens voorheen daarvan gehoor nie!"

"Jy't nog nooit van *Die Verhale van Beedle die Skrywer* gehoor nie?" vra Ron ongelowig. "Jy speel seker!"

"Nee, ek speel nie!" sê Hermione verbaas. "Ken jy dit dan?"

"Maar natuurlik ken ek dit!"

Harry kyk op, sy aandag afgelei. Dit het nog nooit gebeur dat Ron 'n boek gelees het wat Hermione nie gelees het nie. Ron lyk egter geamuseerd dat hulle so verbaas is.

"Ag, komaan! Al die ou kinderstories is veronderstel om Beedle s'n te wees. *Die Fontein van Voorspoed . . . Die Towenaar en die Huppelende Pot . . . Hasiehop Hasieskop en haar Stuitige Stompstert . . .*"

"Ekskuus?" sê Hermione giggelend. "Wat was daai laaste een?"

"Komaan!" sê Ron en kyk in ongeloof van Harry na Hermione. "Julle moes al van Hasiehop Hasieskop gehoor het –"

"Ron, jy weet baie goed ek en Harry is deur Moggels grootgemaak!" sê Hermione. "Ons het nie sulke stories gehoor toe ons klein was nie. Ons moes luister na *Sneeuwitjie en die Sewe Dwergies* en *Aspoestertjie* –"

"Wat's dit, 'n siekte?" vra Ron.

"So dis kinderstories?" vra Hermione en buig weer oor die runes af.

"Ja," sê Ron onseker, "ek bedoel, dis net wat jy hoor, weet jy, dat al daardie ou stories Beedle s'n is. Ek weet nie hoe hulle in die oorspronklike weergawes klink nie."

"Maar ek wonder hoekom Dumbledore gedink het ek moet hulle lees?"

Iets kraak onder.

"Dis seker net Charlie wat noudat Ma slaap sy hare laat langer word," sê Ron senuweeagtig.

"Maak nie saak nie, ons moet bed toe gaan," fluister Hermione. "Ons kan nie môre verslaap nie."

"Nee," stem Ron saam. "'n Brutale driedubbele moord deur die bruidegom se ma sal dalk bietjie van 'n demper op die troue sit. Ek sal die ligte afsit."

En hy klik die Afskakelaar weer toe Hermione by die kamer uitgaan.

CHAPTER EIGHT



THE WEDDING

Three o'clock on the following afternoon found Harry, Ron, Fred, and George standing outside the great white marquee in the orchard, awaiting the arrival of the wedding guests. Harry had taken a large dose of Polyjuice Potion and was now the double of a redheaded Muggle boy from the local village, Ottery St. Catchpole, from whom Fred had stolen hairs using a Summoning Charm. The plan was to introduce Harry as "Cousin Barny" and trust to the great number of Weasley relatives to camouflage him.

All four of them were clutching seating plans, so that they could help show people to the right seats. A host of white-robed waiters had arrived an hour earlier, along with a golden-jacketed band, and

all of these wizards were currently sitting a short distance away under a tree; Harry could see a blue haze of pipe smoke issuing from the spot.

Behind Harry, the entrance to the marquee revealed rows and rows of fragile golden chairs set on either side of a long purple carpet. The supporting poles were entwined with white and gold flowers. Fred and George had fastened an enormous bunch of golden balloons over the exact point where Bill and Fleur would shortly become husband and wife. Outside, butterflies and bees were hovering lazily over the grass and hedgerow. Harry was rather uncomfortable. The Muggle boy whose appearance he was affecting was slightly fatter than him, and his dress robes felt hot and tight in the full glare of a summer's day.

"When I get married," said Fred, tugging at the collar of his own robes, "I won't be bothering with any of this nonsense. You can all wear what you like, and I'll put a full Body-Bind Curse on Mum until it's all over."

"She wasn't too bad this morning, considering," said George. "Cried a bit about Percy not being here, but who wants him? Oh blimey, brace yourselves — here they come, look."

Brightly colored figures were appearing, one by one, out of nowhere at the distant boundary of the yard. Within minutes a procession had formed, which began to snake its way up through the garden toward the marquee. Exotic flowers and bewitched birds fluttered on the witches' hats, while precious gems glittered from many of the wizards' cravats; a hum of excited chatter grew louder and louder, drowning the sound of the bees as the crowd approached

the tent.

"Excellent, I think I see a few veela cousins," said George, craning his neck for a better look. "They'll need help understanding our English customs, I'll look after them. . . ."

"Not so fast, Your Holeyness," said Fred, and darting past the gaggle of middle-aged witches heading the procession, he said, "Here — *permettez-moi* to *assister vous,*" to a pair of pretty French girls, who giggled and allowed him to escort them inside. George was left to deal with the middle-aged witches and Ron took charge of Mr. Weasley's old Ministry colleague Perkins, while a rather deaf old couple fell to Harry's lot.

"Wotcher," said a familiar voice as he came out of the marquee again and found Tonks and Lupin at the front of the queue. She had turned blonde for the occasion. "Arthur told us you were the one with the curly hair. Sorry about last night," she added in a whisper as Harry led them up the aisle. "The Ministry's being very anti-werewolf at the moment and we thought our presence might not do you any favors."

"It's fine, I understand," said Harry, speaking more to Lupin than Tonks. Lupin gave him a swift smile, but as they turned away, Harry saw Lupin's face fall again into lines of misery. He did not understand it, but there was no time to dwell on the matter: Hagrid was causing a certain amount of disruption. Having misunderstood Fred's directions he had sat himself, not upon the magically enlarged and reinforced seat set aside for him in the back row, but on five seats that now resembled a large pile of golden matchsticks.

While Mr. Weasley repaired the damage and Hagrid shouted

apologies to anybody who would listen, Harry hurried back to the entrance to find Ron face-to-face with a most eccentric-looking wizard. Slightly cross-eyed, with shoulder-length white hair the texture of candyfloss, he wore a cap whose tassel dangled in front of his nose and robes of an eye-watering shade of egg-yolk yellow. An odd symbol, rather like a triangular eye, glistened from a golden chain around his neck.

"Xenophilius Lovegood," he said, extending a hand to Harry, "my daughter and I live just over the hill, so kind of the good Weasleys to invite us. But I think you know my Luna?" he added to Ron.

"Yes," said Ron. "Isn't she with you?"

"She lingered in that charming little garden to say hello to the gnomes, such a glorious infestation! How few wizards realize just how much we can learn from the wise little gnomes — or, to give them their correct name, the *Gernumbli gardensi*."

"Ours do know a lot of excellent swear words," said Ron, "but I think Fred and George taught them those."

He led a party of warlocks into the marquee as Luna rushed up.

"Hello, Harry!" she said.

"Er — my name's Barny," said Harry, flummoxed.

"Oh, have you changed that too?" she asked brightly.

"How did you know — ?"

"Oh, just your expression," she said.

Like her father, Luna was wearing bright yellow robes, which she had accessorized with a large sunflower in her hair. Once you got over the brightness of it all, the general effect was quite pleasant. At least there were no radishes dangling from her ears.

Xenophilius, who was deep in conversation with an acquaintance, had missed the exchange between Luna and Harry. Bidding the wizard farewell, he turned to his daughter, who held up her finger and said, "Daddy, look — one of the gnomes actually bit me!"

"How wonderful! Gnome saliva is enormously beneficial!" said Mr. Lovegood, seizing Luna's outstretched finger and examining the bleeding puncture marks. "Luna, my love, if you should feel any burgeoning talent today — perhaps an unexpected urge to sing opera or to declaim in Mermish — do not repress it! You may have been gifted by the Gernumblies!"

Ron, passing them in the opposite direction, let out a loud snort.

"Ron can laugh," said Luna serenely as Harry led her and Xenophilius toward their seats, "but my father has done a lot of research on Gernumbli magic."

"Really?" said Harry, who had long since decided not to challenge Luna or her father's peculiar views. "Are you sure you don't want to put anything on that bite, though?"

"Oh, it's fine," said Luna, sucking her finger in a dreamy fashion and looking Harry up and down. "You look smart. I told Daddy most people would probably wear dress robes, but he believes you ought to wear sun colors to a wedding, for luck, you know."

As she drifted off after her father, Ron reappeared with an elderly witch clutching his arm. Her beaky nose, red-rimmed eyes, and feathery pink hat gave her the look of a bad-tempered flamingo.

". . . and your hair's much too long, Ronald, for a moment I thought you were Ginevra. Merlin's beard, what is Xenophilius Lovegood wearing? He looks like an omelet. And who are you?" she barked at

Harry.

"Oh yeah, Auntie Muriel, this is our cousin Barny."

"Another Weasley? You breed like gnomes. Isn't Harry Potter here? I was hoping to meet him. I thought he was a friend of yours, Ronald, or have you merely been boasting?"

"No — he couldn't come —"

"Hmm. Made an excuse, did he? Not as gormless as he looks in press photographs, then. I've just been instructing the bride on how best to wear my tiara," she shouted at Harry. "Goblin-made, you know, and been in my family for centuries. She's a good-looking girl, but still — *French*. Well, well, find me a good seat, Ronald, I am a hundred and seven and I ought not to be on my feet too long."

Ron gave Harry a meaningful look as he passed and did not reappear for some time: When next they met at the entrance, Harry had shown a dozen more people to their places. The marquee was nearly full now, and for the first time there was no queue outside.

"Nightmare, Muriel is," said Ron, mopping his forehead on his sleeve. "She used to come for Christmas every year, then, thank God, she took offense because Fred and George set off a Dungbomb under her chair at dinner. Dad always says she'll have written them out of her will — like they care, they're going to end up richer than anyone in the family, rate they're going. . . . Wow," he added, blinking rather rapidly as Hermione came hurrying toward them. "You look great!"

"Always the tone of surprise," said Hermione, though she smiled. She was wearing a floaty, lilac-colored dress with matching high heels; her hair was sleek and shiny. "Your Great-Aunt Muriel doesn't agree, I just met her upstairs while she was giving Fleur the tiara.

She said, ‘Oh dear, is this the Muggle-born?’ and then, ‘Bad posture and skinny ankles.’”

“Don’t take it personally, she’s rude to everyone,” said Ron.

“Talking about Muriel?” inquired George, reemerging from the marquee with Fred. “Yeah, she’s just told me my ears are lopsided. Old bat. I wish old Uncle Bilius was still with us, though; he was a right laugh at weddings.”

“Wasn’t he the one who saw a Grim and died twenty-four hours later?” asked Hermione.

“Well, yeah, he went a bit odd toward the end,” conceded George.

“But before he went loopy he was the life and soul of the party,” said Fred. “He used to down an entire bottle of firewhisky, then run onto the dance floor, hoist up his robes, and start pulling bunches of flowers out of his —”

“Yes, he sounds a real charmer,” said Hermione, while Harry roared with laughter.

“Never married, for some reason,” said Ron.

“You amaze me,” said Hermione.

They were all laughing so much that none of them noticed the latecomer, a dark-haired young man with a large, curved nose and thick black eyebrows, until he held out his invitation to Ron and said, with his eyes on Hermione, “You look vunderful.”

“Viktor!” she shrieked, and dropped her small beaded bag, which made a loud thump quite disproportionate to its size. As she scrambled, blushing, to pick it up, she said, “I didn’t know you were — goodness — it’s lovely to see — how are you?”

Ron’s ears had turned bright red again. After glancing at Krum’s

invitation as if he did not believe a word of it, he said, much too loudly, “How come you’re here?”

“Fleur invited me,” said Krum, eyebrows raised.

Harry, who had no grudge against Krum, shook hands; then, feeling that it would be prudent to remove Krum from Ron’s vicinity, offered to show him his seat.

“Your friend is not pleased to see me,” said Krum as they entered the now packed marquee. “Or is he a relative?” he added with a glance at Harry’s red curly hair.

“Cousin,” Harry muttered, but Krum was not really listening. His appearance was causing a stir, particularly amongst the veela cousins: He was, after all, a famous Quidditch player. While people were still craning their necks to get a good look at him, Ron, Hermione, Fred, and George came hurrying down the aisle.

“Time to sit down,” Fred told Harry, “or we’re going to get run over by the bride.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione took their seats in the second row behind Fred and George. Hermione looked rather pink and Ron’s ears were still scarlet. After a few moments he muttered to Harry, “Did you see he’s grown a stupid little beard?”

Harry gave a noncommittal grunt.

A sense of jittery anticipation had filled the warm tent, the general murmuring broken by occasional spurts of excited laughter. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley strolled up the aisle, smiling and waving at relatives; Mrs. Weasley was wearing a brand-new set of amethyst-colored robes with a matching hat.

A moment later Bill and Charlie stood up at the front of the

marquee, both wearing dress robes, with large white roses in their buttonholes; Fred wolf-whistled and there was an outbreak of giggling from the veela cousins. Then the crowd fell silent as music swelled from what seemed to be the golden balloons.

"Ooooh!" said Hermione, swiveling around in her seat to look at the entrance.

A great collective sigh issued from the assembled witches and wizards as Monsieur Delacour and Fleur came walking up the aisle, Fleur gliding, Monsieur Delacour bouncing and beaming. Fleur was wearing a very simple white dress and seemed to be emitting a strong, silvery glow. While her radiance usually dimmed everyone else by comparison, today it beautified everybody it fell upon. Ginny and Gabrielle, both wearing golden dresses, looked even prettier than usual, and once Fleur had reached him, Bill did not look as though he had ever met Fenrir Greyback.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said a slightly singsong voice, and with a slight shock, Harry saw the same small, tufty-haired wizard who had presided at Dumbledore's funeral, now standing in front of Bill and Fleur. "We are gathered here today to celebrate the union of two faithful souls . . ."

"Yes, my tiara sets off the whole thing nicely," said Auntie Muriel in a rather carrying whisper. "But I must say, Ginevra's dress is far too low cut."

Ginny glanced around, grinning, winked at Harry, then quickly faced the front again. Harry's mind wandered a long way from the marquee, back to afternoons spent alone with Ginny in lonely parts of the school grounds. They seemed so long ago; they had always

seemed too good to be true, as though he had been stealing shining hours from a normal person's life, a person without a lightning-shaped scar on his forehead. . . .

"Do you, William Arthur, take Fleur Isabelle . . . ?"

In the front row, Mrs. Weasley and Madame Delacour were both sobbing quietly into scraps of lace. Trumpetlike sounds from the back of the marquee told everyone that Hagrid had taken out one of his own tablecloth-sized handkerchiefs. Hermione turned and beamed at Harry; her eyes too were full of tears.

". . . then I declare you bonded for life."

The tufty-haired wizard waved his wand high over the heads of Bill and Fleur and a shower of silver stars fell upon them, spiraling around their now entwined figures. As Fred and George led a round of applause, the golden balloons overhead burst: Birds of paradise and tiny golden bells flew and floated out of them, adding their songs and chimes to the din.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" called the tufty-haired wizard. "If you would please stand up!"

They all did so, Auntie Muriel grumbling audibly; he waved his wand again. The seats on which they had been sitting rose gracefully into the air as the canvas walls of the marquee vanished, so that they stood beneath a canopy supported by golden poles, with a glorious view of the sunlit orchard and surrounding countryside. Next, a pool of molten gold spread from the center of the tent to form a gleaming dance floor; the hovering chairs grouped themselves around small, white-clothed tables, which all floated gracefully back to earth around it, and the golden-jacketed band trooped toward a podium.

“Smooth,” said Ron approvingly as the waiters popped up on all sides, some bearing silver trays of pumpkin juice, butterbeer, and firewhisky, others tottering piles of tarts and sandwiches.

“We should go and congratulate them!” said Hermione, standing on tiptoe to see the place where Bill and Fleur had vanished amid a crowd of well-wishers.

“We’ll have time later,” shrugged Ron, snatching three butterbeers from a passing tray and handing one to Harry. “Hermione, cop hold, let’s grab a table. . . . Not there! Nowhere near Muriel —”

Ron led the way across the empty dance floor, glancing left and right as he went: Harry felt sure that he was keeping an eye out for Krum. By the time they had reached the other side of the marquee, most of the tables were occupied: The emptiest was the one where Luna sat alone.

“All right if we join you?” asked Ron.

“Oh yes,” she said happily. “Daddy’s just gone to give Bill and Fleur our present.”

“What is it, a lifetime’s supply of Gurdyroots?” asked Ron.

Hermione aimed a kick at him under the table, but caught Harry instead. Eyes watering in pain, Harry lost track of the conversation for a few moments.

The band had begun to play. Bill and Fleur took to the dance floor first, to great applause; after a while, Mr. Weasley led Madame Delacour onto the floor, followed by Mrs. Weasley and Fleur’s father.

“I like this song,” said Luna, swaying in time to the waltzlike tune, and a few seconds later she stood up and glided onto the dance floor,

where she revolved on the spot, quite alone, eyes closed and waving her arms.

"She's great, isn't she?" said Ron admiringly. "Always good value."

But the smile vanished from his face at once: Viktor Krum had dropped into Luna's vacant seat. Hermione looked pleasurably flustered, but this time Krum had not come to compliment her. With a scowl on his face he said, "Who is that man in the yellow?"

"That's Xenophilius Lovegood, he's the father of a friend of ours," said Ron. His pugnacious tone indicated that they were not about to laugh at Xenophilius, despite the clear provocation. "Come and dance," he added abruptly to Hermione.

She looked taken aback, but pleased too, and got up. They vanished together into the growing throng on the dance floor.

"Ah, they are together now?" asked Krum, momentarily distracted.

"Er — sort of," said Harry.

"Who are you?" Krum asked.

"Barny Weasley."

They shook hands.

"You, Barny — you know this man Lovegood vell?"

"No, I only met him today. Why?"

Krum glowered over the top of his drink, watching Xenophilius, who was chatting to several warlocks on the other side of the dance floor.

"Because," said Krum, "if he vos not a guest of Fleur's, I vould duel him, here and now, for vearing that filthy sign upon his chest."

"Sign?" said Harry, looking over at Xenophilius too. The strange triangular eye was gleaming on his chest. "Why? What's wrong with it?"

"Grindelvald. That is Grindelvald's sign."

"Grindelwald . . . the Dark wizard Dumbledore defeated?"

"Exactly."

Krum's jaw muscles worked as if he were chewing, then he said, "Grindelvald killed many people, my grandfather, for instance. Of course, he vos never poverful in this country, they said he feared Dumbledore — and rightly, seeing how he vos finished. But this" — he pointed a finger at Xenophilius — "this is his symbol, I recognized it at vunce: Grindelvald carved it into a vall at Durmstrang ven he vos a pupil there. Some idiots copied it onto their books and clothes, thinking to shock, make themselves impressive — until those of us who had lost family members to Grindelvald taught them better."

Krum cracked his knuckles menacingly and glowered at Xenophilius. Harry felt perplexed. It seemed incredibly unlikely that Luna's father was a supporter of the Dark Arts, and nobody else in the tent seemed to have recognized the triangular, runelike shape.

"Are you — er — quite sure it's Grindelwald's — ?"

"I am not mistaken," said Krum coldly. "I valked past that sign for several years, I know it vell."

"Well, there's a chance," said Harry, "that Xenophilius doesn't actually know what the symbol means. The Lovegoods are quite . . . unusual. He could easily have picked it up somewhere and think it's a cross section of the head of a Crumple-Horned Snorkack or

something.”

“The cross section of a vot?”

“Well, I don’t know what they are, but apparently he and his daughter go on holiday looking for them. . . .”

Harry felt he was doing a bad job explaining Luna and her father.

“That’s her,” he said, pointing at Luna, who was still dancing alone, waving her arms around her head like someone attempting to beat off midges.

“Vy is she doing that?” asked Krum.

“Probably trying to get rid of a Wrackspurt,” said Harry, who recognized the symptoms.

Krum did not seem to know whether or not Harry was making fun of him. He drew his wand from inside his robes and tapped it menacingly on his thigh; sparks flew out of the end.

“Gregorovitch!” said Harry loudly, and Krum started, but Harry was too excited to care; the memory had come back to him at the sight of Krum’s wand: Ollivander taking it and examining it carefully before the Triwizard Tournament.

“Vot about him?” asked Krum suspiciously.

“He’s a wandmaker!”

“I know that,” said Krum.

“He made your wand! That’s why I thought — Quidditch —”

Krum was looking more and more suspicious.

“How do you know Gregorovitch made my vand?”

“I . . . I read it somewhere, I think,” said Harry. “In a — a fan magazine,” he improvised wildly and Krum looked mollified.

"I had not realized I ever discussed my vand with fans," he said. "So . . . er . . . where is Gregorovitch these days?"

Krum looked puzzled.

"He retired several years ago. I vos one of the last to purchase a Gregorovitch vand. They are the best — although I know, of course, that you Britons set much store by Ollivander."

Harry did not answer. He pretended to watch the dancers, like Krum, but he was thinking hard. So Voldemort was looking for a celebrated wandmaker, and Harry did not have to search far for a reason: It was surely because of what Harry's wand had done on the night that Voldemort had pursued him across the skies. The holly and phoenix feather wand had conquered the borrowed wand, something that Ollivander had not anticipated or understood. Would Gregorovitch know better? Was he truly more skilled than Ollivander, did he know secrets of wands that Ollivander did not?

"This girl is very nice-looking," Krum said, recalling Harry to his surroundings. Krum was pointing at Ginny, who had just joined Luna. "She is also a relative of yours?"

"Yeah," said Harry, suddenly irritated, "and she's seeing someone. Jealous type. Big bloke. You wouldn't want to cross him."

Krum grunted.

"Vot," he said, draining his goblet and getting to his feet again, "is the point of being an international Quidditch player if all the good-looking girls are taken?"

And he strode off, leaving Harry to take a sandwich from a passing waiter and make his way around the edge of the crowded dance floor. He wanted to find Ron, to tell him about Gregorovitch, but Ron was

dancing with Hermione out in the middle of the floor. Harry leaned up against one of the golden pillars and watched Ginny, who was now dancing with Fred and George's friend Lee Jordan, trying not to feel resentful about the promise he had given Ron.

He had never been to a wedding before, so he could not judge how Wizarding celebrations differed from Muggle ones, though he was pretty sure that the latter would not involve a wedding cake topped with two model phoenixes that took flight when the cake was cut, or bottles of champagne that floated unsupported through the crowd. As evening drew in, and moths began to swoop under the canopy, now lit with floating golden lanterns, the revelry became more and more uncontained. Fred and George had long since disappeared into the darkness with a pair of Fleur's cousins; Charlie, Hagrid, and a squat wizard in a purple porkpie hat were singing "Odo the Hero" in a corner.

Wandering through the crowd so as to escape a drunken uncle of Ron's who seemed unsure whether or not Harry was his son, Harry spotted an old wizard sitting alone at a table. His cloud of white hair made him look rather like an aged dandelion clock and was topped by a moth-eaten fez. He was vaguely familiar: Racking his brains, Harry suddenly realized that this was Elphias Doge, member of the Order of the Phoenix and the writer of Dumbledore's obituary.

Harry approached him.

"May I sit down?"

"Of course, of course," said Doge; he had a rather high-pitched, wheezy voice.

Harry leaned in.

“Mr. Doge, I’m Harry Potter.”

Doge gasped.

“My dear boy! Arthur told me you were here, disguised. . . . I am so glad, so honored!”

In a flutter of nervous pleasure Doge poured Harry a goblet of champagne.

“I thought of writing to you,” he whispered, “after Dumbledore . . . the shock . . . and for you, I am sure . . .”

Doge’s tiny eyes filled with sudden tears.

“I saw the obituary you wrote for the *Daily Prophet,*” said Harry. “I didn’t realize you knew Professor Dumbledore so well.”

“As well as anyone,” said Doge, dabbing his eyes with a napkin. “Certainly I knew him longest, if you don’t count Aberforth — and somehow, people never *do* seem to count Aberforth.”

“Speaking of the *Daily Prophet* . . . I don’t know whether you saw, Mr. Doge — ?”

“Oh, please call me Elphias, dear boy.”

“Elphias, I don’t know whether you saw the interview Rita Skeeter gave about Dumbledore?”

Doge’s face flooded with angry color.

“Oh yes, Harry, I saw it. That woman, or vulture might be a more accurate term, positively pestered me to talk to her. I am ashamed to say that I became rather rude, called her an interfering trout, which resulted, as you may have seen, in aspersions cast upon my sanity.”

“Well, in that interview,” Harry went on, “Rita Skeeter hinted that Professor Dumbledore was involved in the Dark Arts when he was young.”

"Don't believe a word of it!" said Doge at once. "Not a word, Harry! Let nothing tarnish your memories of Albus Dumbledore!"

Harry looked into Doge's earnest, pained face and felt, not reassured, but frustrated. Did Doge really think it was that easy, that Harry could simply *choose* not to believe? Didn't Doge understand Harry's need to be sure, to know *everything*?

Perhaps Doge suspected Harry's feelings, for he looked concerned and hurried on, "Harry, Rita Skeeter is a dreadful —"

But he was interrupted by a shrill cackle.

"Rita Skeeter? Oh, I love her, always read her!"

Harry and Doge looked up to see Auntie Muriel standing there, the plumes dancing on her hat, a goblet of champagne in her hand. "She's written a book about Dumbledore, you know!"

"Hello, Muriel," said Doge. "Yes, we were just discussing —"

"You there! Give me your chair, I'm a hundred and seven!"

Another redheaded Weasley cousin jumped off his seat, looking alarmed, and Auntie Muriel swung it around with surprising strength and plopped herself down upon it between Doge and Harry.

"Hello again, Barry, or whatever your name is," she said to Harry. "Now, what were you saying about Rita Skeeter, Elphias? You know she's written a biography of Dumbledore? I can't wait to read it, I must remember to place an order at Flourish and Blotts!"

Doge looked stiff and solemn at this, but Auntie Muriel drained her goblet and clicked her bony fingers at a passing waiter for a replacement. She took another large gulp of champagne, belched, and then said, "There's no need to look like a pair of stuffed frogs! Before he became so respected and respectable and all that tosh,

there were some mighty funny rumors about Albus!"

"Ill-informed sniping," said Doge, turning radish-colored again.

"You would say that, Elphias," cackled Auntie Muriel. "I noticed how you skated over the sticky patches in that obituary of yours!"

"I'm sorry you think so," said Doge, more coldly still. "I assure you I was writing from the heart."

"Oh, we all know you worshipped Dumbledore; I daresay you'll still think he was a saint even if it does turn out that he did away with his Squib sister!"

"Muriel!" exclaimed Doge.

A chill that had nothing to do with the iced champagne was stealing through Harry's chest.

"What do you mean?" he asked Muriel. "Who said his sister was a Squib? I thought she was ill?"

"Thought wrong, then, didn't you, Barry!" said Auntie Muriel, looking delighted at the effect she had produced. "Anyway, how could you expect to know anything about it? It all happened years and years before you were even thought of, my dear, and the truth is that those of us who were alive then never knew what really happened. That's why I can't wait to find out what Skeeter's unearthed! Dumbledore kept that sister of his quiet for a long time!"

"Untrue!" wheezed Doge. "Absolutely untrue!"

"He never told me his sister was a Squib," said Harry, without thinking, still cold inside.

"And why on earth would he tell you?" screeched Muriel, swaying a little in her seat as she attempted to focus upon Harry.

"The reason Albus never spoke about Ariana," began Elphias in a

voice stiff with emotion, "is, I should have thought, quite clear. He was so devastated by her death —"

"Why did nobody ever see her, Elphias?" squawked Muriel. "Why did half of us never even know she existed, until they carried the coffin out of the house and held a funeral for her? Where was saintly Albus while Ariana was locked in the cellar? Off being brilliant at Hogwarts, and never mind what was going on in his own house!"

"What d'you mean, locked in the cellar?" asked Harry. "What is this?"

Doge looked wretched. Auntie Muriel cackled again and answered Harry.

"Dumbledore's mother was a terrifying woman, simply terrifying. Muggle-born, though I heard she pretended otherwise —"

"She never pretended anything of the sort! Kendra was a fine woman," whispered Doge miserably, but Auntie Muriel ignored him.

"— proud and very domineering, the sort of witch who would have been mortified to produce a Squib —"

"Ariana was not a Squib!" wheezed Doge.

"So you say, Elphias, but explain, then, why she never attended Hogwarts!" said Auntie Muriel. She turned back to Harry. "In our day, Squibs were often hushed up, though to take it to the extreme of actually imprisoning a little girl in the house and pretending she didn't exist —"

"I tell you, that's not what happened!" said Doge, but Auntie Muriel steamrollered on, still addressing Harry.

"Squibs were usually shipped off to Muggle schools and encouraged to integrate into the Muggle community . . . much kinder

than trying to find them a place in the Wizarding world, where they must always be second class; but naturally Kendra Dumbledore wouldn't have dreamed of letting her daughter go to a Muggle school —"

"Ariana was delicate!" said Doge desperately. "Her health was always too poor to permit her —"

"— to permit her to leave the house?" cackled Muriel. "And yet she was never taken to St. Mungo's and no Healer was ever summoned to see her!"

"Really, Muriel, how you can possibly know whether —"

"For your information, Elphias, my cousin Lancelot was a Healer at St. Mungo's at the time, and he told my family in strictest confidence that Ariana had never been seen there. All most suspicious, Lancelot thought!"

Doge looked to be on the verge of tears. Auntie Muriel, who seemed to be enjoying herself hugely, snapped her fingers for more champagne. Numbly Harry thought of how the Dursleys had once shut him up, locked him away, kept him out of sight, all for the crime of being a wizard. Had Dumbledore's sister suffered the same fate in reverse: imprisoned for her lack of magic? And had Dumbledore truly left her to her fate while he went off to Hogwarts, to prove himself brilliant and talented?

"Now, if Kendra hadn't died first," Muriel resumed, "I'd have said that it was she who finished off Ariana —"

"How can you, Muriel?" groaned Doge. "A mother kill her own daughter? Think what you are saying!"

"If the mother in question was capable of imprisoning her daughter

for years on end, why not?" shrugged Auntie Muriel. "But as I say, it doesn't fit, because Kendra died before Ariana — of what, nobody ever seemed sure —"

"Oh, no doubt Ariana murdered her," said Doge with a brave attempt at scorn. "Why not?"

"Yes, Ariana might have made a desperate bid for freedom and killed Kendra in the struggle," said Auntie Muriel thoughtfully. "Shake your head all you like, Elphias! You were at Ariana's funeral, were you not?"

"Yes I was," said Doge, through trembling lips. "And a more desperately sad occasion I cannot remember. Albus was heartbroken —"

"His heart wasn't the only thing. Didn't Aberforth break Albus's nose halfway through the service?"

If Doge had looked horrified before this, it was nothing to how he looked now. Muriel might have stabbed him. She cackled loudly and took another swig of champagne, which dribbled down her chin.

"How do you — ?" croaked Doge.

"My mother was friendly with old Bathilda Bagshot," said Auntie Muriel happily. "Bathilda described the whole thing to Mother while I was listening at the door. A coffin-side brawl! The way Bathilda told it, Aberforth shouted that it was all Albus's fault that Ariana was dead and then punched him in the face. According to Bathilda, Albus did not even defend himself, and that's odd enough in itself, Albus could have destroyed Aberforth in a duel with both hands tied behind his back."

Muriel swigged yet more champagne. The recitation of these old

scandals seemed to elate her as much as they horrified Doge. Harry did not know what to think, what to believe: He wanted the truth, and yet all Doge did was sit there and bleat feebly that Ariana had been ill. Harry could hardly believe that Dumbledore would not have intervened if such cruelty was happening inside his own house, and yet there was undoubtedly something odd about the story.

"And I'll tell you something else," Muriel said, hiccuping slightly as she lowered her goblet. "I think Bathilda has spilled the beans to Rita Skeeter. All those hints in Skeeter's interview about an important source close to the Dumbledores — goodness knows she was there all through the Ariana business, and it would fit!"

"Bathilda would never talk to Rita Skeeter!" whispered Doge.

"Bathilda Bagshot?" Harry said. "The author of *A History of Magic*?"

The name was printed on the front of one of Harry's textbooks, though admittedly not one of the ones he had read most attentively.

"Yes," said Doge, clutching at Harry's question like a drowning man at a life belt. "A most gifted magical historian and an old friend of Albus's."

"Quite gaga these days, I've heard," said Auntie Muriel cheerfully.

"If that is so, it is even more dishonorable for Skeeter to have taken advantage of her," said Doge, "and no reliance can be placed on anything Bathilda may have said!"

"Oh, there are ways of bringing back memories, and I'm sure Rita Skeeter knows them all," said Auntie Muriel. "But even if Bathilda's completely cuckoo, I'm sure she'd still have old photographs, maybe even letters. She knew the Dumbledores for years. . . . Well worth a

trip to Godric's Hollow, I'd have thought."

Harry, who had been taking a sip of butterbeer, choked. Doge banged him on the back as Harry coughed, looking at Auntie Muriel through streaming eyes. Once he had control of his voice again, he asked, "Bathilda Bagshot lives in Godric's Hollow?"

"Oh yes, she's been there forever! The Dumbledores moved there after Percival was imprisoned, and she was their neighbor."

"The Dumbledores lived in Godric's Hollow?"

"Yes, Barry, that's what I just said," said Auntie Muriel testily.

Harry felt drained, empty. Never once, in six years, had Dumbledore told Harry that they had both lived and lost loved ones in Godric's Hollow. Why? Were Lily and James buried close to Dumbledore's mother and sister? Had Dumbledore visited their graves, perhaps walked past Lily's and James's to do so? And he had never once told Harry . . . never bothered to say . . .

And why it was so important, Harry could not explain even to himself, yet he felt it had been tantamount to a lie not to tell him that they had this place and these experiences in common. He stared ahead of him, barely noticing what was going on around him, and did not realize that Hermione had appeared out of the crowd until she drew up a chair beside him.

"I simply can't dance anymore," she panted, slipping off one of her shoes and rubbing the sole of her foot. "Ron's gone looking to find more butterbeers. It's a bit odd, I've just seen Viktor storming away from Luna's father, it looked like they'd been arguing —" She dropped her voice, staring at him. "Harry, are you okay?"

Harry did not know where to begin, but it did not matter. At that

moment, something large and silver came falling through the canopy over the dance floor. Graceful and gleaming, the lynx landed lightly in the middle of the astonished dancers. Heads turned, as those nearest it froze absurdly in mid-dance. Then the Patronus's mouth opened wide and it spoke in the loud, deep, slow voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming."

Die Troue

Drie-uur die volgende middag staan Harry, Ron, Fred en George buite die groot wit markiestent in die vrugteboord en wag dat die bruilofsgaste arriveer. Harry het 'n groot dosis Polisouspaljas gedrink en is nou 'n rooikop Moggelseun van die plaaslike dorpie, Ottery St Catchpole, se dubbelganger. Fred het 'n Ontbiedtowerspreuk gebruik om van die seun se hare te steel. Die plan is om Harry as "neef Barny" voor te stel en te vertrou dat die groot aantal lede van die Weasley-familie hom sal kamoefleer.

Hulle al vier hou sitplekplanne vas sodat hulle die mense kan help om by die regte stoele uit te kom. 'n Menigte kelners in wit klede het 'n uur gelede hier aangekom, saam met 'n orkes in goue baadjies, en al dié towenaars sit op die oomblik 'n entjie verder onder 'n boom; Harry sien 'n blou waas pyprook daarvandaan opstyg.

Agter Harry lei die ingang tot die markiestent tot rye en rye delikate goue stoele aan weerskante van 'n lang pers mat. Die stutpale is met wit en goue blomme toegevleg. Fred en George het 'n enorme bos goue ballonne vasgebind bokant die presiese plek waar Bill en Fleur binnekort man en vrou gaan word. Buitekant sweef skoenlappers en bye lui oor die gras en heining. Harry voel nogal ongemaklik. Die Moggelseun wie se uiterlike hy aangeneem het, is effens vetter as hy en sy aandkleed voel warm en styf in die somerdag se skerp sonskyn.

"As ek trou," sê Fred en trek aan sy kleed se kraag, "gaan ek nie met enige van hierdie nonsens sukkel nie. Julle kan almal dra wat julle wil, en ek sal 'n algehele Vasbindvloek op Ma sit tot dit alles verby is."

"Sy was alles in ag geneem nie vanmôre te sleg nie," sê George. "Net bietjie gehuil oor Percy nie hier is nie, maar wie mis hom? O demmit, staal julleself – kyk, hier kom hulle."

Helderkleurige figure verskyn een vir een uit die niet by die werf se verste grenslyn. Binne minute vorm daar 'n optog wat nou met

die kronkelpaadjie deur die tuin langs na die markiestent toe beweeg. Eksotiese blomme en betowerde voëls fladder op die hekse se hoede, terwyl edelgesteentes op baie van die towenaars se krawatte glinster; 'n gegons van opgewonde gebabbel word harder en harder en verdoof die geluid van die bye soos die groep die tent nader.

"Uitstekend, ek dink ek sien 'n paar Veela-niggies," sê George wat sy nek rek om beter te kan sien. "Hulle sal hulp nodig hê om ons Engelse gebruike te verstaan. Ek sal na hulle omsien . . ."

"Nie so vinnig nie, Afoor," sê Fred, en terwyl hy tussen die gesnater van die middeljarige hekse inskiet wat die optog lei, sê hy: "Hier – *permettez-moi* om *vous* te *assister*" vir 'n paar pragtige Franse meisies wat hom giggelend toelaat om hulle binnetoe te lei. George moet vir die middeljarige hekse sorg en Ron help Perkins, meneer Weasley se gewese kollega by die Ministerie, terwyl 'n taamlike doof bejaarde egpaar Harry se lot is.

"Hoe's dinge?" sê 'n bekende stem toe hy weer by die markiestent uitkom en Tonks en Lupin voor in die ry aantref. Sy het haar hare blond gemaak vir die geleentheid. "Arthur het vir ons gesê jy's die een met die krulhare. Jammer oor gisteraand," voeg sy fluisterend by terwyl Harry hulle met die paadjie af lei. "Die Ministerie is op die oomblik baie antiweerwolf en ons het gedink ons teenwoordigheid sal dinge dalk vir jou moeilik maak."

"Dis oukei, ek verstaan," sê Harry en praat meer met Lupin as met Tonks. Lupin glimlag vlugtig vir hom, maar soos hulle wegdraai, sien Harry Lupin se gesig verval weer in plooie van ongelukkigheid. Hy verstaan dit nie, maar het nie tyd om daaroor te tob nie: Hagrid veroorsaak 'n mate van ontwrigting. Hy het Fred se aanwysings verkeerd verstaan en nie op die tower vergrote en versterkte stoel wat in die agterste ry vir hom gehou is, gaan sit nie, maar op vyf sitplekke wat nou soos 'n groot hoop goue vuurhoutjies lyk.

Terwyl meneer Weasley die skade herstel en Hagrid verskonings uitroep na almal wat wil luister, gaan Harry vinnig terug na die ingang waar Ron van aangesig tot aangesig staan met 'n towenaar wat geweldig eksentriek lyk. Hy is effens skeel, met skouerlengte wit hare wat die tekstuur van spookasem het, en dra 'n mus met 'n tossel wat voor sy neus rondswaai en 'n kleed in 'n skakering van eiergeel wat 'n mens se oë laat water. 'n Vreemde embleem, amper soos 'n driehoekige oog, glinster aan 'n goue ketting om sy nek.

"Xenophilius Lovegood," sê hy en steek 'n hand na Harry toe uit. "Ek en my dogter woon net anderkant die heuwel, so gaaf van die Weasleys om ons te nooi. Maar ek dink jy ken my Luna?" voeg hy by vir Ron.

"Ja," sê Ron. "Is sy by u?"

"Sy't in daardie sjarmante tuintjie vertoef om hallo te sê vir die aardmannetjies – wat 'n heerlike verpesting! So min towenaars besef hoeveel ons by die wyse klein aardmannetjies kan leer – of, om hulle by hulle regte naam te noem, die *Gernumbli gardensi*."

"Ons s'n ken baie uitstekende vloekwoorde," sê Ron, "maar ek dink Fred en George het dit vir hulle geleer."

Harry lei 'n groep towenaars by die markiestent in net toe Luna nader storm.

"Hallo, Harry!" sê sy.

"E – my naam is Barny," sê Harry dronkgeslaan.

"O, het jy dit ook verander?" vra sy vrolik.

"Hoe't jy geweet –?"

"Og, net jou uitdrukking," sê sy.

Luna dra nes haar pa 'n heldergeel kleed met 'n groot sonneblom as bykomstigheid in haar hare. As 'n mens eers oor die helderheid van alles kom, is die algemene effek eintlik heel aangenaam. Daar hang ten minste nie radyse aan haar ore nie.

Xenophilius was diep in gesprek met 'n kennis en het die woordewisseling tussen Luna en Harry misgeloop. Hy groet die towenaar en draai na sy dogter wat haar vinger lig en sê: "Kyk, Pappa – een van die aardmannetjies het my sowaar gebyt!"

"Dis wonderlik! Aardmannetjiespeeksel is geweldig heilsaam!" sê meneer Lovegood terwyl hy Luna se uitgestrekte vinger gryp en die bloeiende bytmerke bestudeer. "Luna, my lief, as jy vandag van enige ontluikende talent bewus word – miskien 'n onverwagse drang om opera te sing of om in Meermin voor te dra – moenie dit onderdruk nie! Die *Gernumbli's* het jou dalk met daardie gawe geseën!"

Ron loop in die teenoorgestelde rigting verby hulle en proes hardop.

"Ron kan maar lag," sê Luna kalmpies terwyl Harry haar en Xenophilius na hulle sitplekke toe lei. "My pa het baie navorsing oor *Gernumbli*-towerkrag gedoen."

"Regtig?" vra Harry wat lankal besluit het om nie Luna en haar pa se eienaardige sienings te betwis nie. "Is jy seker jy wil nie nogtans iets op daai bytplek sit nie?"

"O, dis oukei," sê Luna wat haar vinger dromerig suig en Harry op en af bekyk. "Jy lyk deftig. Ek het vir Pappa gesê die meeste gaste sal waarskynlik aandklede dra, maar hy glo 'n mens behoort sonkleure na 'n troue toe te dra; vir geluk, weet jy."

Terwyl sy saam met haar pa wegdryf, verskyn Ron weer met 'n bejaarde heks wat aan sy arm vasklou. Haar haakneus, oë met rooi

krinkge om en pienk hoed vol vere laat haar soos 'n kwaai flamink lyk.

". . . en jou hare is veels te lank, Ronald; ek het vir 'n oomblik gedink jy is Ginevra. By Merlin se baard, wat dra Xenophilius Lovegood? Hy lyk soos 'n omelet. En wie is jy?" blaf sy vir Harry.

"O ja, tant Muriel, dis ons neef, Barny."

"Nog 'n Weasley? Julle teel aan soos aardmannetjies. Is Harry Potter nie hier nie? Ek het gehoop ek kan hom ontmoet. Ek dog hy's 'n vriend van jou, Ronald, of het jy net grootgepraat?"

"Nee – hy kon nie kom nie –"

"Hmm. Verskoning gemaak, nè? So hy's nie so onnosel soos wat hy op die foto's in die pers lyk nie. Ek het nou net vir die bruid instruksies gegee oor die beste manier om my tiara te dra," roep sy na Harry toe uit. "Kabouters het dit gemaak, weet jy, en dis al eeue lank in my familie. Sy's 'n aantreklike meisiekind, maar nogtans – *Frans*. Wel, wel, kry vir my 'n goeie sitplek, Ronald, ek is 'n honderd en sewe en ek behoort nie vir te lank op my voete te bly nie."

Ron gee vir Harry 'n betekenisvolle kyk toe hulle verby mekaar loop en verskyn eers weer 'n geruime tyd later. Toe hulle mekaar weer by die ingang ontmoet, het Harry al 'n dosyn meer mense na hulle plekke toe geneem. Die markiestent is nou amper vol en daar is vir die eerste keer nie 'n tou buitekant nie.

"Muriel is 'n nagmerrie," sê Ron en vee sy voorkop met sy mou af. "Sy't altyd eers elke Kersfees kom kuier, maar het haar gelukkig vervies toe Fred en George een aandete 'n Misbom onder haar stoel laat ontplof het. Pa sê altyd sy't hulle seker onterf – asof hulle omgee; soos hulle nou aangaan, gaan hulle ryker as enigiemand anders in die familie wees . . . Maggies," voeg hy by en knip sy oë vinnig terwyl Hermione haar na hulle toe haas. "Jy lyk fantasties!"

"Jy klink altyd so verras," sê Hermione, maar sy glimlag. Sy dra 'n swewende ligpers rok met bypassende hoëhakskoene; haar hare is glad en blink. "Jou groottante Muriel stem nie saam nie. Ek het haar netnou bo ontmoet toe sy vir Fleur die tiara gaan gee het. Sy't gesê: 'Liewe land, is dit 'n Moggelgeborene?' en toe: 'Slegte liggaamshouding en maer enkels.' "

"Moenie dit persoonlik opvat nie, sy's met almal ongeskik," sê Ron.

"Praat julle van Muriel?" vra George wat weer saam met Fred by die markiestent uitkom. "Ja, sy't nou net vir my gesê my ore is windskeef. Ou feeks. Ek wens ou oom Bilius was nog met ons; hy was altyd groot sports by troues."

"Was hy die een wat 'n Grim gesien het en vier-en-twintig uur later dood is?" vra Hermione.

"Wel, ja, hy't aan die einde bietjie snaakserig geraak," erken George.

"Maar voor hy sy varkies kwytgeraak het, was hy gewoonlik die siel van 'n partytjie," sê Fred. "Hy't altyd 'n hele bottel Vuurwhisky afgesluk, dan hardloop hy dansvloer toe, trek sy kleed op en pluk bosse blomme uit sy –"

"Ja-nee, hy klink soos 'n regte bekoorder," sê Hermione terwyl Harry brul van die lag.

"Nooit getrou nie, om die een of ander rede," sê Ron.

"Jy verstom my," sê Hermione.

Hulle lag almal so lekker dat hulle die laatkommer, 'n jong donkerkop man met 'n groot, krom neus en dik swart wenkbroue, eers opmerk toe hy sy uitnodiging na Ron uithou en met sy oë op Hermione sê: "Jy lyk vonderlik."

"Viktor!" roep sy uit en laat val haar klein kraletjiehandsak. Dit tref die grond met 'n harde slag heeltemal buite verhouding met sy grootte. Terwyl sy blosend buk en dit optel, sê sy: "Ek het nie geweet jy is – goeiste – dis lekker om jou weer te sien – hoe gaan dit?"

Ron se ore is weer helderrooi. Hy gluur na Krum se uitnodiging asof hy nie 'n woord daarvan glo nie en sê dan gans te hard: "Wat het jou hier gebring?"

"Fleur het my genooi," sê Krum met geligte wenkbroue.

Harry, wat nie 'n wrok teen Krum het nie, skud sy hand en bied dan aan om Krum na sy plek te neem omdat hy dink dit sal wys wees om hom weg van Ron af te kry.

"Jou vriend is nie bly om my te sien nie," sê Krum terwyl hulle instap by die markiestent wat nou vol is. "Of is hy familie van julle?" voeg hy by en kyk na Harry se rooi krulhare.

"'n Neef," mompel Harry, maar Krum luister nie regtig nie. Sy verskyning veroorsaak 'n opskudding, veral onder die Veela-niggies: hy is per slot van rekening 'n beroemde Kwiddiekspeler. Terwyl mense nog hulle nekke rek om hom beter te kan sien, kom Ron, Hermione, Fred en George vinnig by die paadjie af.

"Tyd om te sit," sê Fred vir Harry, "of die bruid gaan ons onderstebo loop."

Harry, Ron en Hermione gaan sit in die tweede ry agter Fred en George. Hermione lyk taamlik pienk en Ron se ore is nog steeds vuurrooi. Ná 'n paar oomblikke mompel hy vir Harry: "Het jy sy simpel klein baardjie gesien?"

Harry gee 'n neutrale steungeluidjie.

'n Gevoel van opgewonde afwagting vul die warm tent; die al-

gemene geroesemoes word onderbreek deur sporadiese uitbarstings van vrolike gelag. Meneer en mevrou Weasley kom glimlaggend in die gangetjie af en waai vir familie; mevrou Weasley dra 'n splinternuwe ametiskleurige kleed met 'n bypassende hoed.

'n Oomblik later staan Bill en Charlie voor in die markiestent op; albei dra aandklede en het groot wit rose in hul knoopsgate. Fred gee 'n mannetjies fluit en daar breek 'n gegiggel onder die Veela-niggies uit. Dan word almal stil toe musiek opruis, blykbaar uit die goue ballonne uit.

"Oeeeee!" sê Hermione en swaai in haar sitplek om sodat sy die ingang kan sien.

'n Groot, gesamentlike sug word geslaak deur al die teenwoordige hekse en towenaars monsieur Delacour en Fleur met die gangetjie af geloop kom: Fleur sweef, monsieur Delacour bons stralend. Fleur dra 'n baie eenvoudige wit rok en dit lyk of sy 'n helder silwer gloed uitstraal. Gewoonlik verdof haar glans almal om haar, maar vandag maak dit almal waarop dit skyn mooier. Ginny en Gabrielle dra al twee goue rokke en lyk selfs mooier as gewoonlik; toe Fleur by Bill kom, lyk dit of hy nooit vir Fenrir Greyback teëgekom het nie.

"Dames en here," sê 'n effens temerige stem en Harry sien met 'n skok dieselfde klein klossieshaartowenaar wat die verrigtinge by Dumbledore se begrafnis gelei het, staan nou voor Bill en Fleur. "Ons is vandag hier vergader om die eenwording van twee getroue siele te vier . . ."

"Ja, my tiara laat alles mooi tot sy reg kom," fluister tant Muriel taamlik hoorbaar, "maar ek moet sê, Ginevra se rok se hals is gans te laag."

Ginny kyk om, grinnik, knipoog vir Harry en kyk dan vinnig weer vorentoe. Harry se gedagtes dwaal ver van die markiestent af weg, terug na die middae wat hy alleen saam met Ginny in afgeleë plekke op die skoolterrein deurgebring het. Dit voel so lank gelede; dit het altyd te goed gevoel om waar te wees, asof hy die mooiste ure uit 'n normale persoon se lewe gesteel het, iemand sonder 'n litteken in die vorm van 'n weerligstraal op sy voorkop . . .

"Neem jy, William Arthur vir Fleur Isabelle . . .?"

In die voorste ry snik mevrou Weasley en madame Delacour albei sag in fyn kantsakdoekies. Trompetagtige klanke van agter uit die markiestent sê vir almal Hagrid het een van sy tafeldoekgrootte sakdoeke uitgehaal. Hermione draai en glimlag stralend vir Harry; haar oë is ook vol trane.

". . . dan verklaar ek julle lewenslank verenig."

Die klossieshaartowenaar lig sy towerstaf hoog bokant Bill en Fleur se koppe; silwer sterre reën op hulle neer en wentel in 'n spiraal om die twee wat mekaar nou styf vashou. Terwyl Fred en George 'n sarsie applous lei, bars die goue ballonne oop: paradysvoëls en klein goue klokkies vlieg en sweef daaruit en voeg hulle gesing en gelui by die lawaai.

"Dames en here!" roep die klossieshaar-towenaar uit. "Staan asseblief op!"

Almal maak so, al mor tant Muriel hoorbaar, en hy swaai sy towerstaf. Die stoele waarop hulle gesit het, styg grasieus in die lug op terwyl die markiestent se seilmure verdwyn sodat hulle onder die dak gestut met goue pale staan en 'n pragtige uitsig oor die sonverligte boord en die omringende landskap het. Hierna versprei 'n poel gesmelte goud van die middel van die tent af om 'n glinsterende dansvloer te vorm; die swewende stoele groepeer hulleself om tafeltjies bedek met wit tafeldoeke wat almal grasieus terug af aarde toe sak, en die orkeslede met die goue baadjies maak aanstaltes na 'n klein verhogie toe.

"Netjies," sê Ron goedkeurend toe die kelners aan alle kante opduik; party dra silwer skinkborde met pampoensap, Botterbier en Vuurwhisky, ander balanseer stapels tertjies en toebroodjies.

"Ons moet hulle gaan gelukwens!" sê Hermione en staan op haar tone om Bill en Fleur te sien wat tussen 'n groep mense verdwyn het wat hulle voorspoed toewens.

"Ons sal later tyd hê," sê Ron skouerophalend. Hy gryp drie Botterbiere van 'n verbygaande skinkbord af en gee een vir Harry. "Hermione, vat so, kom ons kry 'n tafel . . . nie daar nie! Nie naby Muriel nie –"

Ron loop voor oor die leë dansvloer en kyk links en regs: Harry is seker hy is op die uitkyk vir Krum. Teen die tyd dat hulle aan die ander kant van die markiestent kom, is die meeste tafels beset: die een waar Luna alleen sit, is die leegste.

"Oukei as ons by jou sit?" vra Ron.

"O ja," sê sy vrolik. "Pappa het net gou vir Bill en Fleur ons present gaan gee."

"Wat is dit – 'n leeftyd se voorraad van Goerdiewortels?" vra Ron.

Hermione mik 'n skop onder die tafel na hom, maar tref Harry in plaas van Ron. Harry se oë water van pyn en hy verloor vir 'n paar oomblikke die draad van die gesprek.

Die orkes begin speel. Bill en Fleur open die dansvloer onder groot applous; ná 'n rukkie lei meneer Weasley madame Delacour dansvloer toe, gevolg deur mevrou Weasley en Fleur se pa.

"Ek hou van hierdie liedjie." Luna wieg op maat van die walsdeuntjie en 'n paar sekondes later staan sy op en sweef na die dansvloer toe waar sy op een plek al in die rondte draai, heeltemal alleen, met toe oë en swaaiende arms.

"Sy's wonderlik, nè?" sê Ron vol bewondering. "Doen altyd haar ding."

Maar die glimlag verdwyn skielik van sy gesig af: Viktor Krum het op Luna se leë stoel kom sit. Hermione lyk aangenaam verbouereerd, maar hierdie keer kom Krum nie vir haar 'n kompliment gee nie. Hy vra met 'n frons: "Vie's daai man in die geel?"

"Dis Xenophilius Lovegood; 'n vriendin van ons se pa," sê Ron. Sy bakleierige stemtoon maak dit duidelik dat hulle nie van plan is om vir Xenophilius te lag nie, al is die versoeking groot. "Kom dans," sê hy dan kortaf vir Hermione.

Sy lyk verbluf maar ook in haar skik, en staan op: hulle verdwyn saam in die toenemende gedrang op die dansvloer.

"A, is hulle nou saam?" vra Krum, vir 'n oomblik van stryk gebring.

"E – soort van," sê Harry.

"Vie is jy?" wil Krum weet.

"Barny Weasley."

Hulle skud hand.

"Barny – ken jy hierdie Lovegood-man goed?"

"Nee, ek het hom vandag eers ontmoet. Hoekom?"

Krum gluur oor sy drankie na Xenophilius wat met 'n paar towenaars aan die ander kant van die dansvloer gesels.

"Want," sê Krum, "as hy nie een van Fleur se gaste was nie, het ek hom hier en nou tot 'n tweegeveg uitgedaag omdat hy daardie vieslike teken op sy borskas dra."

"Teken?" sê Harry en kyk nou ook na Xenophilius. Die vreemde, driehoekige oog gloei op sy bors. "Hoekom? Wat's verkeerd daarmee?"

"Grindelvald. Dit is Grindelvald se teken daai."

"Grindelwald . . . die Donker towenaar wat deur Dumbledore verslaan is?"

"Presies."

Krum se kaakspiere beweeg asof hy kou, dan sê hy: "Grindelvald het baie mense doodgemaak, onder andere my oupa. Hy vas natuurlik nooit magtig hier in julle land nie; hulle't gesê hy vas bang vir Dumbledore – en met reg, aangesien hy teen hom verloor het. Maar dit –" Hy wys met sy vinger na Xenophilius. "Dit is sy embleem. Ek het dit dadelik herken: Grindelvald het dit teen 'n muur by

Durmstrang uitgekrap toe hy 'n student daar vas. Party idiote het dit op hulle boeke en klere geteken, vant hulle het gedink dit sal ander skok en beïndruk – tot dié van ons vat deur Grindelvald familielede verloor het hulle 'n les geleer het."

Krum kraak sy kneukels gevaarlik en gluur Xenophilius aan. Harry is verward. Dit voel vir hom ongelooflik en onwaarskynlik dat Luna se pa 'n ondersteuner van die Donker Kunste is, en niemand anders in die tent het skynbaar die driehoekige, runeagtige embleem herken nie.

"Is jy – e – doodseker dis Grindelwald se –"

"Ek veet vaarvan ek praat," sê Krum kil. "Ek het vir hoeveel jaar verby daardie teken geloop; ek ken dit goed."

"Wel, dit kan wees," sê Harry, "dat Xenophilius nie weet wat die embleem regtig beteken nie. Die Lovegoods is baie . . . ongewoon. Hy kon dit maklik iewers opgetel het en gedink het dis 'n dwarssnit van 'n Frommelhoring Snorklap of iets se kop."

" 'n Dwarssnit van 'n vot?"

"Ek weet nie wat dit is nie, maar hy en sy dogter gaan soek glo vakansies daarna . . ."

Harry voel hy kom nie goed genoeg vir Luna en haar pa op nie. "Dis sy," sê hy en wys na Luna wat nog steeds alleen dans en haar arms om haar kop rondswaai soos iemand wat muggies wegwaai.

"Hoekom doen sy dit?" vra Krum.

"Sy probeer seker van 'n Folterpyn ontslae raak," sê Harry wat die simptome herken.

Krum weet blykbaar nie of Harry met hom gekskeer of nie. Hy haal sy towerstaf onder sy kleed uit en tik dreigend daarmee op sy dy; vonke spat by die punt uit.

"Gregorovitch!" sê Harry hard en Krum skrik, maar Harry is te opgewonde om om te gee; die herinnering het hom te binne geskiet toe hy Krumm se towerstaf sien: Ollivander het dit gevat en sorgvuldig bestudeer voor die Drietowenaarstoernooi.

"Vot van hom?" vra Krum agterdogtig.

"Hy's 'n towerstafmaker!"

"Ek veet dit," sê Krum.

"Hy't jou towerstaf gemaak! Dis hoekom ek gedink het – Kwiddiek . . ."

Krum lyk al hoe meer agterdogtig.

"Hoe veet jy Gregorovitch het my toverstaf gemaak?"

"Ek . . . ek het dit iewers gelees, dink ek," sê Harry. "In 'n – 'n tydskrif vir bewonderaars," improviseer hy wild en Krum begin bedaar.

"Ek het nie besef ek het my toverstaf al ooit met bevonderaars bespreek nie," sê hy.

"So . . . e . . . waar is Gregorovitch deesdae?"

Krum lyk verward.

"Hy't 'n hele paar jaar gelede afgetree. Ek was een van die laastes wat 'n Gregorovitch-toverstaf gekoop het. Hulle is die beste – al veet ek julle Britte heg meer vaarde aan Ollivander."

Harry antwoord nie. Hy maak of hy die dansers dophou, net soos Krum, maar hy dink diep na. So Voldemort soek 'n gevierde towerstafmaker, en Harry hoef nie ver na 'n rede te soek nie: dit is ongetwyfeld oor wat Harry se towerstaf gedoen het daardie aand toe Voldemort hom deur die hemelruim agtervolg het. Die hulshout-en feniksveer-towerstaf het die geleende towerstaf oorwin, iets wat Ollivander nie verwag het of kon verstaan nie. Sal Gregorovitch meer kennis hê? Is hy regtig meer bedrewe as Ollivander; ken hy geheime van towerstawwe waarvan Ollivander onbewus is?

"Daai meisie is baie mooi," sê Krum en ruk Harry terug na die werklikheid. Krum beduie na Ginny wat nou net by Luna aangesluit het. "Is sy ook familie van jou?"

"Ja," sê Harry skielik geïrriteerd, "en sy gaan met iemand uit. Jaloerse soort. Groot ou. Jy wil hom nie kwaad maak nie."

Krum snork.

"Vot help dit," sê hy soos hy sy glas leegdrink en weer op die been kom, "ek is 'n internasionale Kwiddiekspeler as die mooi meisies almal klaar bespreek is?"

Hy loop weg; Harry kry 'n toebroodjie by 'n kelner wat verbyloop en beweeg al om die rand van die stampvol dansvloer. Hy wil Ron soek en hom van Gregorovitch vertel, maar Ron dans ver in die middel van die vloer met Hermione. Harry leun teen een van die goue stutpale en kyk na Ginny wat nou met Fred en George se vriend, Lee Jordan, dans terwyl hy probeer om nie vies te wees oor wat hy Ron belowe het nie.

Hy was nog nooit voorheen by 'n troue nie, so hy kan nie oordeel hoe die towerwêreld se feesvierings van die Moggels s'n verskil nie, hoewel hy seker is laasgenoemde het nie 'n troukoek met twee modelfenikse wat wegvlieg wanneer die koek gesny word, of sjampanjebottels wat vanself tussen die gaste rondsweef nie. Soos dit aand word en motte begin toesak op die tentdak wat nou met swewende goue lanterns verlig is, word die joligheid al hoe meer onbeteueld. Fred en George het lankal saam met twee van Fleur se niggies die donker in verdwyn; Charlie, Hagrid en 'n gesette towenaar in 'n pers plat staanrandhoed sing "Odo die Held" in 'n hoek.

Terwyl hy deur die mense drentel om 'n dronk oom van Ron wat blykbaar onseker is of Harry sy seun is of nie, te vermy, merk Harry 'n ou towenaar op wat alleen by 'n tafel sit. Sy wolk wit hare laat hom half soos 'n ou molslaaiklok lyk en met 'n motgevrete fes bo-op. Hy lyk vaagweg bekend: Harry krap kop en besef dan skielik dit is Elphias Doge, 'n lid van die Orde van die Feniks en die man wat Dumbledore se huldeblyk geskryf het.

Harry stap tot by hom.

"Mag ek maar sit?"

"Natuurlik, natuurlik," sê Doge; hy het 'n taamlike hoë, hygende stem.

Harry leun nader.

"Meneer Doge, ek is Harry Potter."

Doge snak na asem.

"My liewe seun! Arthur het vir my gesê jy is hier, vermom . . . Ek is so bly, so geëerd!"

Bewend van opwinding skink Doge vir Harry 'n glas sjampanje.

"Ek wou vir jou skryf," fluister hy, "ná Dumbledore . . . die skok . . . Ek is seker dit was vir jou . . ."

Doge se klein ogies skiet skielik vol trane.

"Ek het die huldeblyk gelees wat u vir die *Daaglikse Profeet* geskryf het," sê Harry. "Ek het nie besef u het professor Dumbledore so goed geken nie."

"So goed soos enigiemand anders," sê Doge en druk sy oë met 'n servet droog. "Ek het hom beslis die langste geken, as jy Aberforth buite rekening laat – en om die een of ander rede laat mense Aberforth *altyd* buite rekening."

"Gepraat van die *Daaglikse Profeet*... Ek weet nie of u gesien het nie, meneer Doge –?"

"Og, noem my asseblief Elphias, my liewe seun."

"Elphias, ek weet nie of jy die onderhoud met Rita Skeeter oor Dumbledore gesien het nie?"

Doge se gesig word rooi van woede.

"O ja, Harry, ek het dit gesien. Daardie vrou, of aasvoël is dalk 'n meer akkurate term, het my absoluut verpes om met haar te praat. Ek moet tot my skande toegee ek het taamlik onbeskof geraak en haar 'n bemoeisieke forel genoem, wat daartoe aanleiding gegee het, soos jy seker gesien het, dat sy my beswadder en my geestesgesondheid in twyfel getrek het."

"Wel, in daardie onderhoud," vervolg Harry, "het Rita Skeeter geskimp dat Dumbledore toe hy jonk was by die Donker Kunste betrokke was."

"Moenie 'n woord daarvan glo nie!" sê Doge dadelik. "Nie 'n enkele woord nie, Harry! Moenie dat enigiets jou herinneringe aan Albus Dumbledore besoedel nie!"

Harry kyk in Doge se ernstige, gepynigde gesig en voel nie gerusgestel nie, maar gefrustreerd. Dink Doge regtig dit is so maklik dat hy eenvoudig net kan *kies* om dit nie te glo nie? Verstaan Doge dan nie hy moet seker wees nie, en *alles* weet?

Miskien vermoed Doge hoe Harry voel, want hy lyk bekommerd en praat haastig verder: "Harry, Rita Skeeter is 'n verskriklike –"

Maar 'n skril gekekkel val hom in die rede.

"Rita Skeeter? O, ek is dol op haar, lees altyd alles van haar!"

Harry en Doge kyk op en sien tant Muriel daar staan met die vere wat op haar hoed dans en 'n glas sjampanje in die hand. "Het julle geweet sy't 'n boek oor Dumbledore geskryf?"

"Naand, Muriel," sê Doge. "Ja, ons praat nou net oor –"

"Jy daar! Gee vir my jou stoel, ek's 'n honderd en sewe!"

Nog 'n rooikop Weasley-neef spring verskrik van sy stoel af op en tant Muriel swaai dit met verbasende krag om en plak haar daarop neer, tussen Doge en Harry.

"Hallo weer eens, Barry, of wat ook al jou naam is," sê sy vir Harry. "So wat was julle besig om van Rita Skeeter te sê, Elphias? Weet jy sy't 'n biografie van Dumbledore geskryf? Ek kan nie wag om dit te lees nie; ek moet onthou om 'n bestelling by Sierskrif en Klatt te plaas!"

Doge lyk skielik stug en somber, maar tant Muriel drink haar glas leeg, klap haar benerige vingers vir 'n kelner wat verbyloop en kry 'n vol glas. Sy neem nog 'n groot sluk sjampanje, breek 'n wind op en sê dan: "Dis nie nodig om soos twee opgestopte paddas te lyk nie! Voor hy so gerespekteer en respektabel en al daardie strooi geraak het, was daar 'n paar danig snaakse gerugte oor Albus!"

"Sleg ingeligte geniepsigheid," sê Doge en word weer die kleur van 'n radys.

"Jy sal so sê, Elphias," kraai tant Muriel. "Ek het gesien hoe lugtig gly jy oor die lastige dele in daardie huldeblyk van jou."

"Ek is jammer jy dink so," sê Doge, wat al hoe killer klink. "Ek verseker jou ek het uit my hart geskryf."

"Og, ons weet almal jy het Dumbledore verafgood; jy sal sowaar nog steeds dink hy was 'n heilige al kom dit uit dat hy sy Misoes van 'n suster van kant gemaak het!"

"*Muriel!*" roep Doge uit.

'n Ysigheid wat niks met die koue sjampanje te doen het nie, sluip deur Harry se borskas.

"Wat bedoel u?" vra hy vir Muriel. "Wie't gesê sy suster was 'n Misoes? Ek dog sy was siek?"

"Verkeerd gedog, Barry, verkeerd!" sê tant Muriel en lyk ingenome oor die uitwerking wat sy op hom het. "In elk geval, hoe kan jy verwag om enigiets daarvan te weet? Dit het alles jare der jare gelede gebeur, voor jy nog eens 'n gedagte was, skatlam, en om jou die waarheid te sê, het ons wat toentertyd gelewe het nooit geweet wat regtig gebeur het nie. Dis hoekom ek nie kan wag om uit te vind wat Skeeter opgediep het nie! Dumbledore het daai suster van hom baie lank stil gehou!"

"Dis onwaar!" sê Doge aamborstig. "Absoluut onwaar!"

"Hy het nooit vir my vertel sy suster was 'n Misoes nie," sê Harry sonder om te dink, nog steeds koud van binne.

"Maar vir wat op aarde sou hy jou vertel het?" vra Muriel skril en wieg effens in haar stoel soos sy op Harry probeer fokus.

"Die rede hoekom Dumbledore nooit van Ariana gepraat het nie," begin Elphias in 'n stem wat stram is van emosie, "is wat my betref heeltemal duidelik. Hy was so te pletter geslaan deur haar dood –"

"Hoekom het niemand haar ooit gesien nie, Elphias?" krys Muriel. "Hoekom het die helfte van ons nooit eens van haar bestaan geweet tot hulle die kis by die huis uitgedra en haar begrawe het nie? Waar was die vroom Albus terwyl Ariana in die kelder opgesluit was? Besig om briljant te wees by Hogwarts, maak nie saak wat in sy eie huis aangaan nie!"

"Wat bedoel u 'in die kelder opgesluit'?" vra Harry. "Wat het daar aangegaan?"

Doge lyk ellendig. Tant Muriel kekkel weer en antwoord Harry.

"Dumbledore se ma was 'n vreesaanjaende vrou, absoluut vreesaanjaend. Moggelgebore, maar ek het gehoor sy't anders voorgegee –"

"Sy het nooit niks van die aard voorgegee nie! Kendra was 'n voortreflike vrou," fluister Doge miserabel, maar tant Muriel ignoreer hom.

"– trots en besonder dominerend, die soort heks wat gegrief sou wees om 'n Misoes in die wêreld te bring –"

"Ariana was nie 'n Misoes nie!" hyg Doge.

"Dis wat jy sê, Elphias, maar verduidelik dan vir my hoekom is sy nooit Hogwarts toe nie!" sê tant Muriel. Sy draai terug na Harry. "Op ons dag is Misoeste dikwels verswyg. Maar om tot die uiterste te gaan en 'n meisietjie in die huis gevange te hou en voor te gee sy bestaan nie –"

"Ek sê vir jou, dis nie wat gebeur het nie!" sê Doge, maar tant Muriel stoom nogtans voort en praat verder met Harry.

"Misoeste is gewoonlik na Moggelskole toe weggestuur en aangemoedig om deel van die Moggelgemeenskap te word . . . dis baie makliker as om 'n plek in die towerwêreld te probeer vind waar hulle altyd tweederangs sal wees; maar Kendra Dumbledore sou natuurlik nie daarvan droom om haar dogter na 'n Moggelskool toe te stuur nie –"

"Ariana was delikaat!" sê Doge desperaat. "Haar gesondheid was altyd te swak om haar toe te laat –"

"Om haar toe te laat om by die huis uit te gaan?" babbel Muriel. "Maar sy's nogtans nooit na Sint Mungo's toe gevat nie en daar is nooit 'n heler ontbied om na haar om te sien nie!"

"Genugtig, Muriel, hoe op aarde kan jy weet of –"

"Vir jou inligting, Elphias, my neef Lancelot was toeka 'n heler by Sint Mungo, en hy't streng vertroulik vir my familie vertel dat Ariana nooit daar gesien is nie. Lancelot het gedink dis uiters verdag!"

Dit lyk of Doge amper in trane is. Tant Muriel geniet haar blykbaar gate uit en klap haar vingers vir nog sjampanje. Harry dink met 'n lam gevoel terug aan hoe die Dursleys hom vroeër stilgemaak en toegesluit en onder die mense se oë uitgehou het, en dit oor die skande dat hy 'n towenaar is. Het dieselfde lot, net omgekeerd, Dumbledore se suster getref? Is sy oor haar gebrek aan towerkrag opgesluit? En het Dumbledore haar regtig aan haar lot oorgelaat deur weg te gaan Hogwarts toe om te bewys hoe briljant en talentvol hy is?

"As Kendra nie eerste dood is nie," hervat Muriel, "sou ek gesê het dit was sy wat Ariana uit die weg geruim het –"

"Hoe kan jy so iets kwytraak, Muriel?" kreun Doge. "'n Moeder wat haar eie dogter doodmaak? Dink wat jy sê!"

"As die betrokke moeder daartoe in staat was om haar dogter vir jare aaneen gevange te hou, hoekom nie?" sê tant Muriel skouerophalend. "Maar soos ek sê, dit strook nie, want Kendra is voor Ariana dood – waaraan het niemand ooit vir seker geweet nie –"

"O, Ariana het haar ongetwyfeld vermoor," sê Doge in 'n dapper poging om te spot. "Hoekom nie?"

"Ja, Ariana het dalk 'n desperate poging aangewend om te ontsnap en Kendra toe in die worsteling doodgemaak," sê tant Muriel ingedagte. "Skud jou kop maar soveel jy wil, Elphias! Jy was tog by Ariana se begrafnis, was jy nie?"

"Ja, ek was," sê Doge deur bewende lippe. "En ek kan nie 'n droewiger geleentheid as dit onthou nie. Albus se hart was gebroke –"

"Nie net sy hart nie. Aberforth het Albus se neus mos halfpad deur die diens gebreek?"

As Doge vroeër geskok gelyk het, is dit niks in vergelyking met hoe hy nou lyk nie. Muriel kon hom net sowel met 'n mes gesteek het. Sy kekkel hard en vat nog 'n groot sluk sjampanje wat by haar ken afdrup.

"Hoe het jy –?" vra Doge hees.

"My ma was vriende met ou Bathilda Bagshot," sê tant Muriel opgewek. "Bathilda het die hele storie vir Moeder beskryf terwyl ek by die deur afgeluister het. 'n Bakleiery om 'n kis! Bathilda het vertel Aberforth het geskree dit was alles Albus se skuld dat Ariana dood is en hom toe in die gesig gemoker. Volgens Bathilda het Albus homself nie eens verdedig nie, en dis op sigself baie eienaardig, want Albus kon Aberforth maklik in 'n tweegeveg verslaan het, al was albei sy hande agter sy rug vasgebind."

Muriel slaan nog meer sjampanje weg. Dit lyk of die ophaal van ou skandes haar so ekstaties maak as wat dit Doge met afgryse vervul. Harry weet nie wat om te dink en wat om te glo nie: hy wil weet wat die waarheid is, maar Doge sit net daar en kerm floutjies dat Ariana sieklik was. Harry kan skaars glo dat Dumbledore nie sou ingryp as daar sulke wreedhede in sy eie huis plaasgevind het nie, maar nogtans is daar ongetwyfeld iets eienaardigs aan hierdie storie.

"En ek sal jou iets anders vertel," sê Muriel, wat effens hik toe sy haar glas laat sak. "Ek dink Bathilda het die aap uit die mou gelaat by Rita Skeeter. Al daai sinspelings in die onderhoud met Skeeter oor 'n belangrike bron na aan die Dumbledores – die vet weet, sy was daar regdeur die ding met Ariana en dit sal mooi netjies inpas!"

"Bathilda sou nooit met Rita Skeeter gepraat het nie!" fluister Doge.

"Bathilda Bagshot?" vra Harry. "Die skryfster van *'n Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns*?"

Die naam staan gedruk voor op een van Harry se handboeke, weliswaar nie een van dié wat hy met aandag gelees het nie.

"Ja," sê Doge en klou aan Harry se vraag vas soos 'n drenkeling aan 'n reddingsgordel. " 'n Uiters begaafde towerkunshistorikus en 'n ou vriendin van Albus."

"Deesdae glo kinds, hoor ek," sê tant Muriel opgeruimd.

"As dit so is, was dit des te meer skandalig van Skeeter om misbruik van haar te maak," sê Doge, "en dan kan 'n mens geen waarde heg aan enigiets wat Bathilda moontlik kwytgeraak het nie!"

"Og, daar is maniere om herinneringe terug te bring, en ek is seker Rita Skeeter ken hulle almal," sê tant Muriel. "Maar selfs al is Bathilda heeltemal kinds, is ek seker sy sal nog ou foto's en dalk

selfs ou briewe hê. Sy het Dumbledore jare lank geken . . . Ek sou dink dit maak 'n uitstappie Godric's Hollow toe beslis die moeite werd."

Harry verstik in 'n sluk Botterbier. Doge slaan hom op die rug terwyl Harry hoes en tant Muriel deur waterige oë aankyk. Toe hy weer beheer oor sy stem het, vra hy: "Bly Bathilda Bagshot in Godric's Hollow?"

"O ja, sy's al vir ewig daar! Die Dumbledores het soontoe getrek ná Percival tronk toe is, en sy was hulle buurvrou."

"Die Dumbledores het in Godric's Hollow gewoon?"

"Ja, Barry, dis wat ek nou net gesê het," sê tant Muriel knorrig.

Harry voel gedreineer, leeg. In ses jaar het Dumbledore nie een keer vir Harry gesê hulle het albei in Godric's Hollow gebly en geliefdes daar verloor nie. Hoekom? Is Lily en James naby Dumbledore se ma en suster begrawe? Het Dumbledore hulle grafte besoek, miskien verby Lily en James s'n geloop om daar te kom? En hy het nie een keer vir Harry daarvan vertel nie . . . hom nie een keer verwerdig om dit te noem nie . . .

En hoekom dit so belangrik is, kan Harry nie verduidelik nie, selfs nie aan homself nie, maar hy voel dit was so goed soos 'n leuen om nie vir hom te vertel hulle het hierdie plek en hierdie ervarings gemeen nie. Hy staar voor hom uit, sien skaars wat om hom aangaan en besef eers Hermione het uit die skare verskyn toe sy 'n stoel tot langs hom trek.

"Ek kan eenvoudig nie meer dans nie," hyg sy; sy trek een van haar skoene uit en vryf haar voetsool. "Ron het gou nog Botterbier gaan soek. Dis 'n bietjie eienaardig, ek het nou net gesien hoe Viktor van Luna se pa af wegstorm; dit het gelyk of hulle gestry het –" Sy laat sak haar stem en staar na hom. "Harry, is jy oukei?"

Harry weet nie waar om te begin nie, maar dit maak nie saak nie. Op hierdie oomblik val iets groots en silwers deur die tentdak oor die dansvloer. Dis 'n links wat ligvoets en glansend in die middel van die verstomde dansers land. Koppe draai terwyl dié wat naaste daaraan is absurd in die middel van die dans vries. Dan gaan die Patronus se mond wyd oop en dit praat in Kingsley Schacklebolt se duidelike, diep, stadige stem.

"Die Ministerie het geval. Scrimgeour is dood. Hulle kom."

CHAPTER NINE



A PLACE TO HIDE

Everything seemed fuzzy, slow. Harry and Hermione jumped to their feet and drew their wands. Many people were only just realizing that something strange had happened; heads were still turning toward the silver cat as it vanished. Silence spread outward in cold ripples from the place where the Patronus had landed. Then somebody screamed.

Harry and Hermione threw themselves into the panicking crowd. Guests were sprinting in all directions; many were Disapparating; the protective enchantments around the Burrow had broken.

"Ron!" Hermione cried. "Ron, where are you?"

As they pushed their way across the dance floor, Harry saw

cloaked and masked figures appearing in the crowd; then he saw Lupin and Tonks, their wands raised, and heard both of them shout, *"Protego!"*, a cry that was echoed on all sides —

"Ron! Ron!" Hermione called, half sobbing as she and Harry were buffeted by terrified guests: Harry seized her hand to make sure they weren't separated as a streak of light whizzed over their heads, whether a protective charm or something more sinister he did not know —

And then Ron was there. He caught hold of Hermione's free arm, and Harry felt her turn on the spot; sight and sound were extinguished as darkness pressed in upon him; all he could feel was Hermione's hand as he was squeezed through space and time, away from the Burrow, away from the descending Death Eaters, away, perhaps, from Voldemort himself. . . .

"Where are we?" said Ron's voice.

Harry opened his eyes. For a moment he thought they had not left the wedding after all: They still seemed to be surrounded by people.

"Tottenham Court Road," panted Hermione. "Walk, just walk, we need to find somewhere for you to change."

Harry did as she asked. They half walked, half ran up the wide dark street thronged with late-night revelers and lined with closed shops, stars twinkling above them. A double-decker bus rumbled by and a group of merry pub-goers ogled them as they passed; Harry and Ron were still wearing dress robes.

"Hermione, we haven't got anything to change into," Ron told her, as a young woman burst into raucous giggles at the sight of him.

"Why didn't I make sure I had the Invisibility Cloak with me?"

said Harry, inwardly cursing his own stupidity. "All last year I kept it on me and —"

"It's okay, I've got the Cloak, I've got clothes for both of you," said Hermione. "Just try and act naturally until — this will do."

She led them down a side street, then into the shelter of a shadowy alleyway.

"When you say you've got the Cloak, and clothes . . ." said Harry, frowning at Hermione, who was carrying nothing except her small beaded handbag, in which she was now rummaging.

"Yes, they're here," said Hermione, and to Harry and Ron's utter astonishment, she pulled out a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, some maroon socks, and finally the silvery Invisibility Cloak.

"How the ruddy hell — ?"

"Undetectable Extension Charm," said Hermione. "Tricky, but I think I've done it okay; anyway, I managed to fit everything we need in here." She gave the fragile-looking bag a little shake and it echoed like a cargo hold as a number of heavy objects rolled around inside it. "Oh, damn, that'll be the books," she said, peering into it, "and I had them all stacked by subject. . . . Oh well. . . . Harry, you'd better take the Invisibility Cloak. Ron, hurry up and change. . . ."

"When did you do all this?" Harry asked as Ron stripped off his robes.

"I told you at the Burrow, I've had the essentials packed for days, you know, in case we needed to make a quick getaway. I packed your rucksack this morning, Harry, after you changed, and put it in here. . . . I just had a feeling. . . ."

"You're amazing, you are," said Ron, handing her his bundled-up

robes.

"Thank you," said Hermione, managing a small smile as she pushed the robes into the bag. "Please, Harry, get that Cloak on!"

Harry threw the Invisibility Cloak around his shoulders and pulled it up over his head, vanishing from sight. He was only just beginning to appreciate what had happened.

"The others — everyone at the wedding —"

"We can't worry about that now," whispered Hermione. "It's you they're after, Harry, and we'll just put everyone in even more danger by going back."

"She's right," said Ron, who seemed to know that Harry was about to argue, even if he could not see his face. "Most of the Order was there, they'll look after everyone."

Harry nodded, then remembered that they could not see him, and said, "Yeah." But he thought of Ginny, and fear bubbled like acid in his stomach.

"Come on, I think we ought to keep moving," said Hermione.

They moved back up the side street and onto the main road again, where a group of men on the opposite side was singing and weaving across the pavement.

"Just as a matter of interest, why Tottenham Court Road?" Ron asked Hermione.

"I've no idea, it just popped into my head, but I'm sure we're safer out in the Muggle world, it's not where they'll expect us to be."

"True," said Ron, looking around, "but don't you feel a bit — exposed?"

"Where else is there?" asked Hermione, cringing as the men on the

other side of the road started wolf-whistling at her. "We can hardly book rooms at the Leaky Cauldron, can we? And Grimmauld Place is out if Snape can get in there. . . . I suppose we could try my parents' house, though I think there's a chance they might check there. . . . Oh, I wish they'd shut up!"

"All right, darling?" the drunkest of the men on the other pavement was yelling. "Fancy a drink? Ditch ginger and come and have a pint!"

"Let's sit down somewhere," Hermione said hastily as Ron opened his mouth to shout back across the road. "Look, this will do, in here!"

It was a small and shabby all-night café. A light layer of grease lay on all the Formica-topped tables, but it was at least empty. Harry slipped into a booth first and Ron sat next to him opposite Hermione, who had her back to the entrance and did not like it: She glanced over her shoulder so frequently she appeared to have a twitch. Harry did not like being stationary; walking had given the illusion that they had a goal. Beneath the Cloak he could feel the last vestiges of Polyjuice leaving him, his hands returning to their usual length and shape. He pulled his glasses out of his pocket and put them on again.

After a minute or two, Ron said, "You know, we're not far from the Leaky Cauldron here, it's only in Charing Cross —"

"Ron, we can't!" said Hermione at once.

"Not to stay there, but to find out what's going on!"

"We know what's going on! Voldemort's taken over the Ministry, what else do we need to know?"

"Okay, okay, it was just an idea!"

They relapsed into a prickly silence. The gum-chewing waitress

shuffled over and Hermione ordered two cappuccinos: As Harry was invisible, it would have looked odd to order him one. A pair of burly workmen entered the café and squeezed into the next booth. Hermione dropped her voice to a whisper.

"I say we find a quiet place to Disapparate and head for the countryside. Once we're there, we could send a message to the Order."

"Can you do that talking Patronus thing, then?" asked Ron.

"I've been practicing and I think so," said Hermione.

"Well, as long as it doesn't get them into trouble, though they might've been arrested already. God, that's revolting," Ron added after one sip of the foamy, grayish coffee. The waitress had heard; she shot Ron a nasty look as she shuffled off to take the new customers' orders. The larger of the two workmen, who was blond and quite huge, now that Harry came to look at him, waved her away. She stared, affronted.

"Let's get going, then, I don't want to drink this muck," said Ron. "Hermione, have you got Muggle money to pay for this?"

"Yes, I took out all my Building Society savings before I came to the Burrow. I'll bet all the change is at the bottom," sighed Hermione, reaching for her beaded bag.

The two workmen made identical movements, and Harry mirrored them without conscious thought: All three of them drew their wands. Ron, a few seconds late in realizing what was going on, lunged across the table, pushing Hermione sideways onto her bench. The force of the Death Eaters' spells shattered the tiled wall where Ron's head had just been, as Harry, still invisible, yelled, *"Stupefy!"*

The great blond Death Eater was hit in the face by a jet of red light: He slumped sideways, unconscious. His companion, unable to see who had cast the spell, fired another at Ron: Shining black ropes flew from his wand-tip and bound Ron head to foot — the waitress screamed and ran for the door — Harry sent another Stunning Spell at the Death Eater with the twisted face who had tied up Ron, but the spell missed, rebounded on the window, and hit the waitress, who collapsed in front of the door.

"Expulso!" bellowed the Death Eater, and the table behind which Harry was standing blew up: The force of the explosion slammed him into the wall and he felt his wand leave his hand as the Cloak slipped off him.

"Petrificus Totalus!" screamed Hermione from out of sight, and the Death Eater fell forward like a statue to land with a crunching thud on the mess of broken china, table, and coffee. Hermione crawled out from underneath the bench, shaking bits of glass ashtray out of her hair and trembling all over.

"D-diffindo," she said, pointing her wand at Ron, who roared in pain as she slashed open the knee of his jeans, leaving a deep cut. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Ron, my hand's shaking! *Diffindo!*"

The severed ropes fell away. Ron got to his feet, shaking his arms to regain feeling in them. Harry picked up his wand and climbed over all the debris to where the large blond Death Eater was sprawled across the bench.

"I should've recognized him, he was there the night Dumbledore died," he said. He turned over the darker Death Eater with his foot; the man's eyes moved rapidly between Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"That's Dolohov," said Ron. "I recognize him from the old wanted posters. I think the big one's Thorfinn Rowle."

"Never mind what they're called!" said Hermione a little hysterically. "How did they find us? What are we going to do?"

Somehow her panic seemed to clear Harry's head.

"Lock the door," he told her, "and Ron, turn out the lights."

He looked down at the paralyzed Dolohov, thinking fast as the lock clicked and Ron used the Deluminator to plunge the café into darkness. Harry could hear the men who had jeered at Hermione earlier, yelling at another girl in the distance.

"What are we going to do with them?" Ron whispered to Harry through the dark; then, even more quietly, "Kill them? They'd kill us. They had a good go just now."

Hermione shuddered and took a step backward. Harry shook his head.

"We just need to wipe their memories," said Harry. "It's better like that, it'll throw them off the scent. If we killed them it'd be obvious we were here."

"You're the boss," said Ron, sounding profoundly relieved. "But I've never done a Memory Charm."

"Nor have I," said Hermione, "but I know the theory."

She took a deep, calming breath, then pointed her wand at Dolohov's forehead and said, *"Obliviate."*

At once, Dolohov's eyes became unfocused and dreamy.

"Brilliant!" said Harry, clapping her on the back. "Take care of the other one and the waitress while Ron and I clear up."

"Clear up?" said Ron, looking around at the partly destroyed café.

"Why?"

"Don't you think they might wonder what's happened if they wake up and find themselves in a place that looks like it's just been bombed?"

"Oh right, yeah . . ."

Ron struggled for a moment before managing to extract his wand from his pocket.

"It's no wonder I can't get it out, Hermione, you packed my old jeans, they're tight."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," hissed Hermione, and as she dragged the waitress out of sight of the windows, Harry heard her mutter a suggestion as to where Ron could stick his wand instead.

Once the café was restored to its previous condition, they heaved the Death Eaters back into their booth and propped them up facing each other.

"But how did they find us?" Hermione asked, looking from one inert man to the other. "How did they know where we were?"

She turned to Harry.

"You — you don't think you've still got your Trace on you, do you, Harry?"

"He can't have," said Ron. "The Trace breaks at seventeen, that's Wizarding law, you can't put it on an adult."

"As far as you know," said Hermione. "What if the Death Eaters have found a way to put it on a seventeen-year-old?"

"But Harry hasn't been near a Death Eater in the last twenty-four hours. Who's supposed to have put a Trace back on him?"

Hermione did not reply. Harry felt contaminated, tainted: Was that

really how the Death Eaters had found them?

"If I can't use magic, and you can't use magic near me, without us giving away our position —" he began.

"We're not splitting up!" said Hermione firmly.

"We need a safe place to hide," said Ron. "Give us time to think things through."

"Grimmauld Place," said Harry.

The other two gaped.

"Don't be silly, Harry, Snape can get in there!"

"Ron's dad said they've put up jinxes against him — and even if they haven't worked," he pressed on as Hermione began to argue, "so what? I swear, I'd like nothing better than to meet Snape!"

"But —"

"Hermione, where else is there? It's the best chance we've got. Snape's only one Death Eater. If I've still got the Trace on me, we'll have whole crowds of them on us wherever else we go."

She could not argue, though she looked as if she would have liked to. While she unlocked the café door, Ron clicked the Deluminator to release the café's light. Then, on Harry's count of three, they reversed the spells upon their three victims, and before the waitress or either of the Death Eaters could do more than stir sleepily, Harry, Ron, and Hermione had turned on the spot and vanished into the compressing darkness once more.

Seconds later Harry's lungs expanded gratefully and he opened his eyes: They were now standing in the middle of a familiar small and shabby square. Tall, dilapidated houses looked down on them from every side. Number twelve was visible to them, for they had been

told of its existence by Dumbledore, its Secret-Keeper, and they rushed toward it, checking every few yards that they were not being followed or observed. They raced up the stone steps, and Harry tapped the front door once with his wand. They heard a series of metallic clicks and the clatter of a chain, then the door swung open with a creak and they hurried over the threshold.

As Harry closed the door behind them, the old-fashioned gas lamps sprang into life, casting flickering light along the length of the hallway. It looked just as Harry remembered it: eerie, cobwebbed, the outlines of the house-elf heads on the wall throwing odd shadows up the staircase. Long dark curtains concealed the portrait of Sirius's mother. The only thing that was out of place was the troll's leg umbrella stand, which was lying on its side as if Tonks had just knocked it over again.

"I think somebody's been in here," Hermione whispered, pointing toward it.

"That could've happened as the Order left," Ron murmured back.

"So where are these jinxes they put up against Snape?" Harry asked.

"Maybe they're only activated if he shows up?" suggested Ron.

Yet they remained close together on the doormat, backs against the door, scared to move farther into the house.

"Well, we can't stay here forever," said Harry, and he took a step forward.

"Severus Snape?"

Mad-Eye Moody's voice whispered out of the darkness, making all three of them jump back in fright. "We're not Snape!" croaked

Harry, before something whooshed over him like cold air and his tongue curled backward on itself, making it impossible to speak. Before he had time to feel inside his mouth, however, his tongue had unraveled again.

The other two seemed to have experienced the same unpleasant sensation. Ron was making retching noises; Hermione stammered, “That m-must have b-been the T-Tongue-Tying Curse Mad-Eye set up for Snape!”

Gingerly Harry took another step forward. Something shifted in the shadows at the end of the hall, and before any of them could say another word, a figure had risen up out of the carpet, tall, dust-colored, and terrible: Hermione screamed and so did Mrs. Black, her curtains flying open; the gray figure was gliding toward them, faster and faster, its waist-length hair and beard streaming behind it, its face sunken, fleshless, with empty eye sockets: Horribly familiar, dreadfully altered, it raised a wasted arm, pointing at Harry.

“No!” Harry shouted, and though he had raised his wand no spell occurred to him. “No! It wasn’t us! We didn’t kill you —”

On the word *kill*, the figure exploded in a great cloud of dust: Coughing, his eyes watering, Harry looked around to see Hermione crouched on the floor by the door with her arms over her head, and Ron, who was shaking from head to foot, patting her clumsily on the shoulder and saying, “It’s all r-right. . . . It’s g-gone. . . .”

Dust swirled around Harry like mist, catching the blue gaslight, as Mrs. Black continued to scream.

“Mudbloods, filth, stains of dishonor, taint of shame on the house of my fathers —”

"SHUT UP!" Harry bellowed, directing his wand at her, and with a bang and a burst of red sparks, the curtains swung shut again, silencing her.

"That . . . that was . . . ." Hermione whimpered, as Ron helped her to her feet.

"Yeah," said Harry, "but it wasn't really him, was it? Just something to scare Snape."

Had it worked, Harry wondered, or had Snape already blasted the horror-figure aside as casually as he had killed the real Dumbledore? Nerves still tingling, he led the other two up the hall, half-expecting some new terror to reveal itself, but nothing moved except for a mouse skittering along the skirting board.

"Before we go any farther, I think we'd better check," whispered Hermione, and she raised her wand and said, *"Homenum revelio."*

Nothing happened.

"Well, you've just had a big shock," said Ron kindly. "What was that supposed to do?"

"It did what I meant it to do!" said Hermione rather crossly. "That was a spell to reveal human presence, and there's nobody here except us!"

"And old Dusty," said Ron, glancing at the patch of carpet from which the corpse-figure had risen.

"Let's go up," said Hermione with a frightened look at the same spot, and she led the way up the creaking stairs to the drawing room on the first floor.

Hermione waved her wand to ignite the old gas lamps, then, shivering slightly in the drafty room, she perched on the sofa, her

arms wrapped tightly around her. Ron crossed to the window and moved the heavy velvet curtain aside an inch.

"Can't see anyone out there," he reported. "And you'd think, if Harry still had a Trace on him, they'd have followed us here. I know they can't get in the house, but — what's up, Harry?"

Harry had given a cry of pain: His scar had burned again as something flashed across his mind like a bright light on water. He saw a large shadow and felt a fury that was not his own pound through his body, violent and brief as an electric shock.

"What did you see?" Ron asked, advancing on Harry. "Did you see him at my place?"

"No, I just felt anger — he's really angry —"

"But that could be at the Burrow," said Ron loudly. "What else? Didn't you see anything? Was he cursing someone?"

"No, I just felt anger — I couldn't tell —"

Harry felt badgered, confused, and Hermione did not help as she said in a frightened voice, "Your scar, again? But what's going on? I thought that connection had closed!"

"It did, for a while," muttered Harry; his scar was still painful, which made it hard to concentrate. "I — I think it's started opening again whenever he loses control, that's how it used to —"

"But then you've got to close your mind!" said Hermione shrilly. "Harry, Dumbledore didn't want you to use that connection, he wanted you to shut it down, that's why you were supposed to use Occlumency! Otherwise Voldemort can plant false images in your mind, remember —"

"Yeah, I do remember, thanks," said Harry through gritted teeth; he

did not need Hermione to tell him that Voldemort had once used this selfsame connection between them to lead him into a trap, nor that it had resulted in Sirius's death. He wished that he had not told them what he had seen and felt; it made Voldemort more threatening, as though he were pressing against the window of the room, and still the pain in his scar was building and he fought it: It was like resisting the urge to be sick.

He turned his back on Ron and Hermione, pretending to examine the old tapestry of the Black family tree on the wall. Then Hermione shrieked: Harry drew his wand again and spun around to see a silver Patronus soar through the drawing room window and land upon the floor in front of them, where it solidified into the weasel that spoke with the voice of Ron's father.

"Family safe, do not reply, we are being watched."

The Patronus dissolved into nothingness. Ron let out a noise between a whimper and a groan and dropped onto the sofa: Hermione joined him, gripping his arm.

"They're all right, they're all right!" she whispered, and Ron half laughed and hugged her.

"Harry," he said over Hermione's shoulder, "I —"

"It's not a problem," said Harry, sickened by the pain in his head. "It's your family, 'course you're worried. I'd feel the same way." He thought of Ginny. "I *do* feel the same way."

The pain in his scar was reaching a peak, burning as it had done in the garden of the Burrow. Faintly he heard Hermione say, "I don't want to be on my own. Could we use the sleeping bags I've brought and camp in here tonight?"

He heard Ron agree. He could not fight the pain much longer: He had to succumb.

"Bathroom," he muttered, and he left the room as fast as he could without running.

He barely made it: Bolting the door behind him with trembling hands, he grasped his pounding head and fell to the floor, then in an explosion of agony, he felt the rage that did not belong to him possess his soul, saw a long room lit only by firelight, and the great blond Death Eater on the floor, screaming and writhing, and a slighter figure standing over him, wand outstretched, while Harry spoke in a high, cold, merciless voice.

"More, Rowle, or shall we end it and feed you to Nagini? Lord Voldemort is not sure that he will forgive this time. . . . You called me back for this, to tell me that Harry Potter has escaped again? Draco, give Rowle another taste of our displeasure . . . Do it, or feel my wrath yourself!"

A log fell in the fire: Flames reared, their light darting across a terrified, pointed white face — with a sense of emerging from deep water, Harry drew heaving breaths and opened his eyes.

He was spread-eagled on the cold black marble floor, his nose inches from one of the silver serpent tails that supported the large bathtub. He sat up. Malfoy's gaunt, petrified face seemed branded on the inside of his eyes. Harry felt sickened by what he had seen, by the use to which Draco was now being put by Voldemort.

There was a sharp rap on the door, and Harry jumped as Hermione's voice rang out.

"Harry, do you want your toothbrush? I've got it here."

“Yeah, great, thanks,” he said, fighting to keep his voice casual as he stood up to let her in.

— HOOFSTUK NEGE —

'n Skuilplek

Alles voel wasig, stadig. Harry en Hermione spring op hulle voete en pluk hulle towerstawwe uit. Baie mense besef nou eers daar het iets vreemds gebeur; koppe draai nog na die silwer kat toe dit verdwyn. Stilte kring in koue kabbels uit van die plek waar die Patronus geland het. Dan skree iemand.

Harry en Hermione werp hulle in die paniekerige menigte. Gaste hardloop in alle rigtings; baie Disappareer; die beskermende paljasse om Die Konynenes is verbreek.

"Ron!" roep Hermione uit. "Ron, waar is jy?"

Terwyl hulle vir hulle 'n pad oor die dansvloer oopstoot, sien Harry figure met mantels en maskers tussen die mense verskyn; dan sien hy Lupin en Tonks met hulle towerstawwe opgehef staan en hoor hoe skree hulle al twee: "*Protego!*", 'n gil wat na alle kante toe weerklink –

"Ron! Ron!" roep Hermione half in trane terwyl sy en Harry deur verskrikte gaste rondgestamp word: Harry gryp haar hand om seker te maak hulle bly bymekaar toe 'n ligstraal oor hulle koppe verby sis sonder dat hy weet of dit 'n beskermende towerspreuk of iets meer onheilspellends is –

En dan is Ron daar. Hy gryp Hermione se los arm en Harry voel hoe sy op een plek begin tol; beelde en klank word uitgedoof deur die donker wat hom verswelg; al wat hy kan voel, is Hermione se hand soos hy deur ruimte en tyd gepers word, weg van Die Konynenes af, weg van die neerdalende Doodseters af, weg, miskien van Voldemort self . . .

"Waar is ons?" vra Ron se stem.

Harry maak sy oë oop. Hy dink vir 'n oomblik hulle is na alles toe nie by die troue weg nie: hulle is nog steeds omring deur mense.

"Tottenham Court-weg," hyg Hermione. "Loop, hou net aan loop; ons moet 'n plek kry waar julle ander klere kan aantrek."

Harry maak soos sy sê. Hulle loop half, hardloop half met die breë, donker straat op wat wemel van laatnag-plesiermakers en toe

winkels aan albei kante; sterre bokant hulle flonker. 'n Dubbeldekkerbus dreun verby en 'n groep vrolike kroeglopers kyk hulle skeef aan soos hulle verbystap; Harry en Ron dra nog steeds aandklede.

"Hermione, ons het niks anders om aan te trek nie," sê Ron vir haar toe 'n jong vrou uitbundig begin giggel toe sy hom sien.

"Hoekom het ek nie seker gemaak ek het die Onsigbaarheidsmantel by my nie?" sê Harry terwyl hy homself in die stilligheid vloek oor sy onnoselheid. "Ek het dit laas jaar heeltyd by my gehou en –"

"Dis oukei, ek het die Mantel en ek het vir julle al twee klere," sê Hermione. "Probeer net normaal optree totdat – dit sal die ding doen."

Sy lei hulle by 'n systraat af en dan in by 'n stegie wat in skaduwee gehul is en skuiling bied.

"Jy sê jy't die Mantel en klere?" vra Harry fronsend vir Hermione wat niks dra behalwe haar klein kraletjiehandsak waarin sy nou rondkrap nie.

"Ja, dis hier," sê Hermione, en tot Harry en Ron se absolute verstomming bring sy 'n paar jeans te voorskyn, en 'n sweetpaktop, bruinrooi sokkies en, uiteindelik, die silwerige Onsigbaarheidsmantel.

"Hoe de blerrie hel –?"

"Onopspoorbare Uitbreidingspreuk," sê Hermione. "Moeilik, maar ek dink ek het dit oukei gedoen; in elk geval, ek het dit reggekry om alles wat ons nodig het hierin te kry." Sy skud die delikate handsak effens en dit weerklink soos 'n laairuim toe 'n paar swaar voorwerpe daarin rondrol. "O maggies, dis natuurlik die boeke," sê sy en loer in, "en ek het hulle volgens onderwerp gerangskik . . . Ag wel . . . Harry, jy beter die Onsigbaarheidsmantel vat. Ron, maak gou, trek aan . . ."

"Wanneer het jy dit alles gedoen?" vra Harry terwyl Ron sy kleed uittrek.

"Ek het vir jou by Die Konynenes gesê ek het die noodsaaklikste goed al dae lank gepak en gereed, weet jy, vir ingeval ons vinnig moet vlug. Ek het jou rugsak vanoggend ingepak, Harry, ná jy aangetrek het en dit hierin gesit . . . Ek het net 'n voorgevoel gehad . . ."

"Jy's ongelooflik, weet jy," sê Ron en gee sy opgefrommelde kleed vir haar.

"Dankie," sê Hermione en glimlag effens terwyl sy die kleed in die handsak prop. "Asseblief, Harry, trek daardie Mantel nou aan!"

Harry gooi die Onsigbaarheidsmantel om sy skouers en trek dit oor sy kop sodat hy verdwyn. Dit begin nou eers tot hom deurdring wat gebeur het.

"Die ander – almal by die troue –"

"Ons kan ons nie nou daaroor bekommer nie," fluister Hermione. "Hulle's agter jou aan, Harry; ons sal almal net nog meer in gevaar stel as ons teruggaan."

"Sy's reg," sê Ron asof hy weet Harry is op die punt om te begin argumenteer, selfs al kan hy sy gesig nie sien nie. "Die meerderheid van die Orde was daar; hulle sal na almal kyk."

Harry knik, onthou dan hulle kan hom nie sien nie en sê: "Ja." Maar hy dink aan Ginny en vrees borrel soos suur in sy maag.

"Komaan, ek dink ons moet aanhou beweeg," sê Hermione.

Hulle loop terug met die systraatjie en weer by die hoofstraat in waar 'n groep mans aan die oorkant al singende oor die sypaadjie slinger.

"Net interessantheidshalwe, hoekom Tottenham Court-weg?" vra Ron vir Hermione.

"Ek het nie 'n benul nie; dit het net in my kop opgekom, maar ek is seker ons is veiliger in die Moggelwêreld; hulle sal nie verwag ons is hier nie."

"Dis waar," sê Ron en kyk rond, "maar voel julle nie 'n bietjie – blootgestel nie?"

"Waarheen anders kon ons gegaan het?" vra Hermione en krimp ineen toe die mans oorkant die straat vir haar begin fluit. "Ons kan tog nie vir ons kamers in die Stomende Pot bespreek nie, kan ons? En Grimmauldplein is buite die kwessie as Snape daar kan inkom . . . Ek veronderstel ons kan my ouers se huis probeer, maar ek dink daar's 'n moontlikheid dat hulle daar sal gaan kyk . . . Ag, ek wens hulle wil stilbly!"

"Jy oukei, liefie?" roep die dronkste van die mans op die oorkantste sypaadjie. "Lus vir 'n dop? Los daai rooikop en kom maak saam met ons keel nat!"

"Kom ons gaan sit iewers," sê Hermione haastig toe Ron sy mond oopmaak om terug oor die straat te skree. "Dit sal werk, hier in!"

Dit is 'n klein en verslonste deurnagkafee. Daar is 'n ligte vetlaag op al die Formica-tafelblaaie, maar die plek is ten minste leeg. Harry glip eerste by 'n sithoekie in en Ron sit langs hom oorkant Hermione. Haar rug is na die ingang toe gedraai en sy hou nie daarvan nie: sy loer so aanhoudend oor haar skouer dat dit lyk of sy 'n spasma het. Harry hou nie daarvan om stil te sit nie; die lopery het die illusie geskep dat hulle 'n doelwit het. Hy kan onder die Mantel voel

hoe die laaste oorblyfsels van die Polisouspaljas hom verlaat; sy hande word weer hulle gewone lengte en vorm. Hy haal sy bril uit sy sak en sit dit op.

Na 'n minuut of twee sê Ron: "Weet julle, ons is nie ver van die Stomende Pot af nie; dis net in Charing Cross –"

"Ron, ons kan nie!" sê Hermione dadelik.

"Nie om daar te bly nie; net om uit te vind wat aangaan!"

"Ons weet wat aangaan! Voldemort het die Ministerie oorgeneem; wat anders moet ons weet?"

"Oukei, oukei, dit was net 'n idee!"

Hulle verval in stekelrige stilte. Die kougomkouende kelnerin kom skoorvoetend nader en Hermione bestel twee cappuccino's: Harry is onsigbaar, so dit sal vreemd lyk om vir hom een te bestel. Twee fris geboude werksmense kom by die kafee in en druk by die tafel langsaan in. Hermione laat sak haar stem tot 'n fluistering.

"Ek stel voor ons kry 'n stil plek om te Disappareer en mik platteland toe. As ons eers daar is, kan ons vir die Orde 'n boodskap stuur."

"Kan jy dan daai pratende Patronus-ding doen?" vra Ron.

"Ek het geoefen en ek dink so," sê Hermione.

"Wel, solank dit hulle nie in die moeilikheid laat beland nie, tensy hulle natuurlik al klaar gearresteer is. Jig, dis walglik," voeg Ron by ná een sluk van die skuimerige grys koffie. Die kelnerin het dit gehoor; sy gee Ron 'n vies kyk en skuifel weg om die nuwe klante se bestelling te neem. Die grootste van die twee werksmense, wat blond en taamlik groot is noudat Harry hom bekyk, beduie vir haar om weg te gaan. Sy staar hom vies aan.

"Kom ons waai; ek gaan nie hierdie gemors drink nie," sê Ron. "Hermione, het jy Moggelgeld om hiervoor te betaal?"

"Ja, ek het al die spaargeld uit my rekening by die bouvereniging getrek voor ek na Die Konynenes toe gekom het. Ek wed julle die kleingeld lê heel onder," sug Hermione en reik uit na haar kraletjiehandsak.

Die twee werksmense maak identiese bewegings en Harry volg hulle voorbeeld sonder om bewustelik daaroor te dink: al drie trek hulle towerstawwe uit. Ron besef eers 'n paar sekondes later wat aangaan; hy skiet vorentoe oor die tafel en druk Hermione eenkant toe op haar bank. Die krag van die Doodseters se paljasse laat spat die geteëlde muur waar Ron se kop so pas was uitmekaar terwyl Harry, nog steeds onsigbaar, gil: *"Bedwelm!"*

'n Rooi ligstraal tref die groot blonde Doodseter in die gesig: hy sak sywaarts inmekaar, bewusteloos. Sy makker kan nie sien wie die

towerspreuk afgevuur het nie en stuur nog een op Ron af: blinkswart toue vlieg uit sy towerstaf se punt en bind Ron van kop tot tone vas – die kelnerin gil en hardloop deur toe – Harry rig nog 'n Bedwelmspreuk op die Doodseter met die verwronge gesig wat Ron vasgebind het, maar dis mis, bons van die venster af terug en tref die kelnerin wat voor die deur neerslaan.

"*Expulso!*" brul die Doodseter en die tafel waaragter Harry staan, blaas in die lug op: die geweld van die ontploffing gooi hom tot teen die muur en hy voel sy towerstaf uit sy hand val soos die Mantel van hom afglip.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" skree Hermione sonder om gesien te word; die Doodseter val soos 'n standbeeld vorentoe en beland met 'n knarsende slag op die puin van verwoeste breekgoed, tafel en koffie. Hermione kruip onder die bank uit, skud skerwe van 'n glasasbak uit haar hare terwyl haar hele liggaam bewe.

"*D – Diffindo,*" sê sy en wys met haar towerstaf na Ron wat brul van pyn toe Hermione sy jeans by die knie oopvlek en 'n diep sny agterlaat. "O, ek's jammer, Ron, my hand bewe! *Diffindo!*"

Die losgesnyde toue val van hom af. Ron kom op die been en skud sy arms om weer gevoel in hulle te kry. Harry tel sy towerstaf op en klim oor die puin na waar die groot blonde Doodseter oor die bank uitgestrek lê.

"Ek moes hom herken het; hy was daar die nag toe Dumbledore dood is," sê hy. Hy draai die donkerder Doodseter met sy voet om; die man se oë beweeg vinnig tussen Harry, Ron en Hermione.

"Dis Dolohof," sê Ron. "Ek herken hom van die ou Gesoek-plakkate. Ek dink die groot ou is Thorfinn Rowle."

"Maak nie saak wat hulle name is nie!" sê Hermione effens histeries. "Hoe't hulle ons gekry? Wat gaan ons doen?"

Dit is asof haar paniek Harry se kop weer helder maak.

"Sluit die deur," sê hy vir haar, "en Ron, sit af die ligte."

Hy kyk af na die verlamde Dolohof en dink vinnig soos die slot klik en Ron die Afskakelaar gebruik om die kafee in duisternis te hul. Harry hoor die mans wat Hermione vroeër gekoggel het nou op die agtergrond vir 'n ander meisie skree.

"Wat gaan ons met hulle doen?" fluister Ron in die donker vir Harry, en dan, selfs nog sagter: "Moet ons hulle doodmaak? Hulle sou ons doodgemaak het. Hulle't netnou hard probeer."

Hermione ril en gee 'n tree terug. Harry skud sy kop.

"Ons moet net hulle geheues uitwis," sê Harry. "Dis beter so; dit sal hulle van die spoor af kry. As ons hulle doodmaak, sal dit duidelik wees ons was hier."

"Jy's die baas," sê Ron en klink innig verlig. "Maar ek het nog nooit 'n Geheuetowerspreuk gedoen nie."

"Ek ook nie," sê Hermione, "maar ek ken die teorie."

Sy asem diep in om te kalmeer, rig haar towerstaf dan op Dolohof se voorkop en sê: "*Wis uit!*"

Dolohof se oë word dadelik dof en dromerig.

"Briljant!" sê Harry en klop haar op die rug. "Sorg vir die ander een en die kelnerin terwyl ek en Ron opruim."

"Opruim?" sê Ron en kyk rond na die restaurant wat gedeeltelik verwoes is. "Hoekom?"

"Dink jy nie hulle sal dalk wonder wat gebeur het as hulle wakker word en hulle in 'n plek bevind wat lyk of dit nou net deur 'n bom getref is nie?"

"O ja, jy's reg . . ."

Ron sukkel vir 'n oomblik om sy towerstaf uit sy sak te kry.

"Dis g'n wonder ek kan dit nie uitkry nie, Hermione. Jy't my ou jeans ingepak: hulle sit te styf."

"O, ek's jammer," sis Hermione en terwyl sy die kelnerin weg van die vensters af sleep, hoor Harry haar mompelend voorstel waar Ron sy towerstaf kan insteek.

Toe die kafee reggetoor is en weer soos vroeër lyk, hys hulle die Doodseters terug in hulle sithoekie en laat hulle regop oorkant mekaar sit.

"Maar hoe het hulle ons gekry?" vra Hermione terwyl sy van die een beweginglose man na die ander kyk. "Hoe het hulle geweet waar ons is?"

Sy draai na Harry toe.

"Jy – jy dink nie die Spoor is dalk nog op jou nie, Harry?"

"Kan nie wees nie," sê Ron. "Die Spoor word op sewentien opgehef. Dis 'n towerwet; jy kan dit nie op 'n volwassene sit nie."

"Sover ons weet," sê Hermione. "Wat as die Doodseters 'n manier gekry het om dit op 'n sewentienjarige te sit?"

"Maar Harry was die laaste vier-en-twintig uur nie naby 'n Doodseter nie. Wie kon weer 'n Spoor op hom gesit het?"

Hermione antwoord nie. Harry voel besoedel, besmet: is dit regtig hoe die Doodseters hulle gekry het?

"As ek nie towerkrag kan gebruik nie, en julle kan nie towerkrag naby my gebruik sonder dat ons verklap waar ons is nie . . ." begin hy.

"Ons gaan nie uitmekaar nie!" sê Hermione beslis.

"Ons het 'n veilige skuilplek nodig," sê Ron. "Om ons tyd te gee om dinge te deurdink."

"Grimmauldplein," sê Harry.

Die ander twee gaap hom aan.

"Moenie simpel wees nie, Harry; Snape kan daar inkom!"

"Ron se pa sê hulle het paljasse teen hom opgestel – en selfs al werk die goed nie," gaan hy verder toe Hermione wil begin stry, "wat daarvan? Ek sweer, niks sal vir my lekkerder wees as om Snape raak te loop nie!"

"Maar –"

"Hermione, waar anders is daar? Dis ons beste kans. Snape is net een Doodseter. As die Spoor nog steeds op my is, gaan daar hordes van hulle op ons wees, waar ons ook al gaan."

Sy kan nie hierteen stry nie, al lyk dit of sy graag sou wou. Terwyl sy die kafee se deur oopsluit, klik Ron die Afskakelaar om die kafee se lig aan te sit. Dan tel Harry tot by drie en hulle herroep die towerspreuke op hulle drie slagoffers. Voor die kelnerin of een van die Doodseters meer kan doen as om slaperig te roer, draai Harry, Ron en Hermione om en verdwyn weer eens in die digte duisternis.

Sekondes later swel Harry se longe dankbaar uit en hy maak sy oë oop: hulle staan nou in die middel van 'n bekende klein, gehawende pleintjie. Hoë, verwaarloosde huise kyk van alle kante op hulle af. Nommer twaalf is sigbaar vir hulle, want Dumbledore, sy Geheimhouer, het hulle van die huis vertel. Hulle haas hulle soontoe terwyl hulle kort-kort omkyk om te sien of hulle nie gevolg of dopgehou word nie. Hulle hardloop by die kliptrap op en Harry tik een keer met sy towerstaf teen die voordeur. Hulle hoor 'n reeks metaalklikklanke en 'n gekletter van 'n ketting, dan swaai die deur krakend oop en hulle skarrel oor die drumpel.

Terwyl Harry die deur agter hulle toemaak, kry die outydse gaslampe lewe en gooi flikkerende lig al met die lengte van die voorportaal af. Alles lyk nog net soos Harry dit onthou: onheilspellend, vol spinnerakke, die buitelyne van die huiselwe se koppe teen die muur wat vreemde skaduwees teen die trap op gooi. Lang, donker gordyne bedek die portret van Sirius se ma. Die enigste ding wat uit plek is, is die trolbeen-sambreelstaander wat plat lê asof Tonks dit so pas weer omgestamp het.

"Ek dink hier was iemand," fluister Hermione en wys daarna.

"Dit kon gebeur het toe die Orde hier weg is," prewel Ron terug.

"So waar's die paljasse wat hulle teen Snape opgestel het?" vra Harry.

"Miskien word dit net geaktiveer as hy hier uitslaan?" stel Ron voor.

Hulle bly nogtans naby mekaar op die deurmat staan met hulle rûe teen die deur, te bang om verder by die huis in te gaan.

"Wel, ons kan nie vir ewig hier staan nie," sê Harry en gee 'n tree vorentoe.

"*Severus Snape?*"

Maloog Moody se stem fluister uit die donkerte en laat hulle al drie terugspring van skrik. "Ons is nie Snape nie!" roep Harry benoud voor iets soos koue lug oor hom suis en sy tong terugkrul wat dit onmoontlik maak om te praat. Voor hy egter tyd kry om dit reg te maak, kom sy tong weer los.

Dit lyk of die ander twee dieselfde onaangename sensasie ervaar het. Ron maak braakgeluide; Hermione stotter: "Dit m – moet die – Tongknoopvloek wees wat M – Maloog vir Snape opgestel het!"

Harry gee behoedsaam 'n tree vorentoe. Iets skuifel in die skadu's aan die einde van die portaal en voor enigeen van hulle 'n woord verder kan sê, rys 'n figuur van die mat op: lank, stofkleurig en afskuwelik. Hermione gil en so ook mevrou Black: haar gordyne vlieg oop. Die grys figuur sweef na hulle toe, vinniger en vinniger; die hare wat tot op sy middellyf hang en sy baard sweef agter hom aan, sy gesig is ingevalle, vleesloos, met leë oogkasse: aaklig bekend, vreesaanjaend anders, lig dan 'n weggeteerde arm en wys na Harry.

"Nee!" skree Harry, maar al lig hy sy towerstaf, kan hy nie aan 'n towerspreuk dink nie. "Nee! Dit was nie ons nie! Ons het jou nie vermoor nie –"

By die woord "vermoor" ontplof die figuur in 'n groot stofwolk. Al hoesende en met waterige oë kyk Harry om en sien Hermione op die vloer by die deur hurk met haar arms oor haar kop terwyl Ron, wat van kop tot tone bewe, haar lomp op die skouer klop en sê: "Dis alles ouk – kei . . . Dis w – weg . . ."

Stof warrel soos mis om Harry in die blou gaslig terwyl mevrou Black aanhou gil.

"*Modderbloede, uitvaagsels, skandvlekke, smet van skande op my vaders se huis –*"

"SJARRAP!" brul Harry. Hy rig sy towerstaf op haar en met 'n knal en 'n sarsie rooi vonke swaai die gordyne weer toe en maak haar stil.

"Dit . . . dit was . . ." sê Hermione met 'n huilstem terwyl Ron haar op haar voete help.

"Ja," sê Harry, "maar dit was nie regtig hy nie, was dit? Dis net iets om Snape mee skrik te maak."

Het dit gewerk, wonder Harry, of het Snape die afgryslike figuur alreeds opsy geblaas so ongeërg soos hy die werklike Dumbledore

vermoor het? Met gespanne senuwees lei hy die ander twee verder by die portaal in, half verwagtend dat een of ander nuwe verskrikking te voorskyn gaan kom, maar niks beweeg nie afgesien van 'n muis wat met die vloerlys langs wegskarrel.

"Voor ons verder gaan, dink ek ons moet eers seker maak," fluister Hermione. Sy lig haar towerstaf en sê: *"Homenum revelio."*

Niks gebeur nie.

"Wel, jy't nou net groot geskrik," sê Ron simpatiek. "Wat was dit veronderstel om te doen?"

"Dit het gedoen wat ek wou hê dit moes!" sê Hermione taamlik opgeruk. "Dis 'n towerspreuk om menslike teenwoordigheid te openbaar, en daar's niemand hier behalwe ons nie!"

"En ou Stoffie," sê Ron en loer na die kol op die mat waaruit die lykfiguur verrys het.

"Kom ons gaan boontoe," sê Hermione met 'n bang kyk na dieselfde plek en loop eerste by die krakende trap op na die sitkamer op die eerste verdieping.

Hermione swaai haar towerstaf om die gaslampe aan te steek en terwyl sy effens ril in die trekkerige vertrek gaan sit sy kiertsregop op die rusbank met haar arms styf om haarself gevou. Ron loop na die venster toe en trek die swaar fluweelgordyn op 'n skrefie oop.

"Sien niemand daarbuite nie," doen hy verslag. "En jy sal dink as daar nog steeds 'n Spoor op Harry is, sou hulle ons hiernatoe gevolg het. Ek weet hulle kan nie by die huis inkom nie, maar – wassit, Harry?"

Harry skree van pyn: sy litteken brand weer toe iets deur sy kop flits soos 'n helder lig op water. Hy sien 'n groot skaduwee en voel 'n woede wat nie sy eie is nie deur sy lyf ruk, so gewelddadig en kortstondig soos 'n elektriese skok.

"Wat het jy gesien?" vra Ron en beweeg na Harry toe. "Het jy hom by ons huis gesien?"

"Nee, ek het net sy woede gevoel – hy's regtig woedend –"

"Maar dit kan by Die Konynenes wees," sê Ron hard. "Waar anders? Het jy niks gesien nie? Het hy iemand vervloek?"

"Nee, ek het net woede gevoel – ek kon nie uitmaak –"

Harry voel in 'n hoek vasgekeer en verward, en Hermione maak dit erger as sy in 'n bang stem sê: "Is dit weer jou litteken? Maar wat gaan aan? Ek dog daardie verbintenis is verbreek!"

"Dit was, vir 'n rukkie," prewel Harry; sy litteken pyn nog steeds, wat dit moeilik maak om te konsentreer. "Ek – ek dink dit begin weer terugkom wanneer hy beheer verloor; dis hoe dit vroeër altyd –"

"Maar dan moet jy jou verstand afsluit!" sê Hermione skril. "Harry, Dumbledore wou nie hê jy moes daardie verbintenis gebruik nie. Hy wou hê jy moet dit verbreek; dis hoekom jy veronderstel was om Okklumensie te gebruik! Anders kan Voldemort vals beelde in jou gedagtes plant, onthou –"

"Ja, ek onthou, dankie," sê Harry deur knersende tande; hy het nie vir Hermione nodig om hom te herinner dat Voldemort hierdie einste verbintenis tussen hulle eenkeer gebruik het om hom in 'n lokval te lei nie, en ook nie dat dit tot Sirius se dood gelei het nie. Hy wens hy het hulle nooit vertel wat hy gesien en gevoel het nie; dit maak Voldemort net nog meer van 'n bedreiging, asof hy teen die vertrek se venster druk, en die pyn in sy litteken bou op en hy veg daarteen: dit is soos om te probeer keer dat jy opgooi.

Hy draai sy rug op Ron en Hermione en maak asof hy die ou tapisserie van die Blacks se stamboom teen die muur bestudeer. Dan gil Hermione; Harry pluk sy towerstaf weer uit en swaai om: 'n silwer Patronus sweef deur die sitkamer se venster en land op die vloer voor hulle waar dit verdig tot die wesel wat met Ron se pa se stem praat.

"Familie veilig, moenie antwoord nie, ons word dopgehou."

Die Patronus verdwyn in die niet. Ron maak 'n geluid tussen 'n snik en 'n kreun en val op die rusbank neer; Hermione kom sit by hom en gryp sy arm.

"Hulle's oukei, hulle's oukei!" fluister sy en Ron grinnik en druk haar vas.

"Harry," sê hy oor Hermione se skouer, "ek –"

"Maak nie saak nie," sê Harry wat naar voel van die pyn in sy kop. "Dis jou familie; natuurlik is jy bekommerd. Ek sou ook so gevoel het." Hy dink aan Ginny. "Ek *voel* ook so."

Die pyn in sy litteken bereik 'n hoogtepunt en brand nou soos in Die Konynenes se tuin. Hy hoor Hermione vaagweg sê: "Ek wil nie alleen wees nie. Kan ons die slaapsakke wat ek gebring het, gebruik en vannag hier slaap?"

Hy hoor Ron instem. Hy kan nie meer baie langer teen die pyn veg nie: hy moet swig.

"Badkamer," prewel hy en verlaat die vertrek so vinnig as wat hy kan sonder om te hardloop.

Hy haal dit beswaarlik. Hy sit die deur agter hom met bewende hande op knip, gryp na sy kloppende kop en val op die vloer neer en dan, in 'n ontploffing van ondraaglike pyn, voel hy hoe die woede wat nie aan hom behoort nie besit neem van sy siel, sien hy 'n lang vertrek, net deur kaggelgloed verlig, en die groot blonde

Doodseter op die vloer, gillend en stuiptrekkend, en 'n skraler figuur wat oor hom staan met sy towerstaf uitgestrek terwyl Harry in 'n hoë, koue, genadelose stem praat:

"Nog, Rowle, of sal ons 'n einde aan alles maak en jou vir Nagini voer? Die Heer Voldemort is nie seker of hy jou dié keer gaan vergewe nie . . . Is dit waarvoor jy my teruggeroep het; om vir my te sê Harry Potter het weer eens ontsnap? Draco, gee vir Rowle nog 'n smakie van ons misnoeë . . . Doen dit, of voel self my gramskap!"

'n Houtstomp val in die vuur; vlamme verrys, hulle lig skiet oor 'n doodsbang, skerp wit gesig – met 'n gevoel asof hy uit diep water opkom, snak Harry hygend na lug en maak sy oë oop.

Hy lê oopgespalk op die koue swart marmervloer, sy neus amper reg by een van die silwer slangsterte waarop die groot bad rus. Hy sit regop. Dit voel of Malfoy se bleek, paniekbevange gesig aan die binnekant van sy oë ingebrand is. Harry walg van wat hy gesien het, van hoe Voldemort Draco nou gebruik.

Daar is 'n harde klop aan die deur en Harry wip van die skrik toe hy Hermione se stem hoor.

"Harry, wil jy jou tandeborsel hê? Ek het dit hier."

"Ja, asseblief, dankie," sê hy en veg om sy stem ongeërg te hou terwyl hy opstaan om haar te laat inkom.

CHAPTER TEN



KREACHER'S TALE

Harry woke early next morning, wrapped in a sleeping bag on the drawing room floor. A chink of sky was visible between the heavy curtains: It was the cool, clear blue of watered ink, somewhere between night and dawn, and everything was quiet except for Ron and Hermione's slow, deep breathing. Harry glanced over at the dark shapes they made on the floor beside him. Ron had had a fit of gallantry and insisted that Hermione sleep on the cushions from the sofa, so that her silhouette was raised above his. Her arm curved to the floor, her fingers inches from Ron's. Harry wondered whether they had fallen asleep holding hands. The idea made him feel strangely lonely.

He looked up at the shadowy ceiling, the cobwebbed chandelier. Less than twenty-four hours ago, he had been standing in the sunlight at the entrance to the marquee, waiting to show in wedding guests. It

seemed a lifetime away. What was going to happen now? He lay on the floor and he thought of the Horcruxes, of the daunting, complex mission Dumbledore had left him . . . Dumbledore . . .

The grief that had possessed him since Dumbledore's death felt different now. The accusations he had heard from Muriel at the wedding seemed to have nested in his brain like diseased things, infecting his memories of the wizard he had idolized. Could Dumbledore have let such things happen? Had he been like Dudley, content to watch neglect and abuse as long as it did not affect him? Could he have turned his back on a sister who was being imprisoned and hidden?

Harry thought of Godric's Hollow, of graves Dumbledore had never mentioned there; he thought of mysterious objects left without explanation in Dumbledore's will, and resentment swelled in the darkness. Why hadn't Dumbledore told him? Why hadn't he explained? Had Dumbledore actually cared about Harry at all? Or had Harry been nothing more than a tool to be polished and honed, but not trusted, never confided in?

Harry could not stand lying there with nothing but bitter thoughts for company. Desperate for something to do, for distraction, he slipped out of his sleeping bag, picked up his wand, and crept out of the room. On the landing he whispered, "*Lumos,*" and started to climb the stairs by wandlight.

On the second landing was the bedroom in which he and Ron had slept last time they had been here; he glanced into it. The wardrobe doors stood open and the bedclothes had been ripped back. Harry remembered the overturned troll leg downstairs. Somebody had

searched the house since the Order had left. Snape? Or perhaps Mundungus, who had pilfered plenty from this house both before and after Sirius died? Harry's gaze wandered to the portrait that sometimes contained Phineas Nigellus Black, Sirius's great-great-grandfather, but it was empty, showing nothing but a stretch of muddy backdrop. Phineas Nigellus was evidently spending the night in the headmaster's study at Hogwarts.

Harry continued up the stairs until he reached the topmost landing, where there were only two doors. The one facing him bore a nameplate reading SIRIUS. Harry had never entered his godfather's bedroom before. He pushed open the door, holding his wand high to cast light as widely as possible. The room was spacious and must once have been handsome. There was a large bed with a carved wooden headboard, a tall window obscured by long velvet curtains, and a chandelier thickly coated in dust with candle stubs still resting in its sockets, solid wax hanging in frostlike drips. A fine film of dust covered the pictures on the walls and the bed's headboard; a spider's web stretched between the chandelier and the top of the large wooden wardrobe, and as Harry moved deeper into the room, he heard a scurrying of disturbed mice.

The teenage Sirius had plastered the walls with so many posters and pictures that little of the walls' silvery-gray silk was visible. Harry could only assume that Sirius's parents had been unable to remove the Permanent Sticking Charm that kept them on the wall, because he was sure they would not have appreciated their eldest son's taste in decoration. Sirius seemed to have gone out of his way to annoy his parents. There were several large Gryffindor banners,

faded scarlet and gold, just to underline his difference from all the rest of the Slytherin family. There were many pictures of Muggle motorcycles, and also (Harry had to admire Sirius's nerve) several posters of bikini-clad Muggle girls; Harry could tell that they were Muggles because they remained quite stationary within their pictures, faded smiles and glazed eyes frozen on the paper. This was in contrast to the only Wizarding photograph on the walls, which was a picture of four Hogwarts students standing arm in arm, laughing at the camera.

With a leap of pleasure, Harry recognized his father; his untidy black hair stuck up at the back like Harry's, and he too wore glasses. Beside him was Sirius, carelessly handsome, his slightly arrogant face so much younger and happier than Harry had ever seen it alive. To Sirius's right stood Pettigrew, more than a head shorter, plump and watery-eyed, flushed with pleasure at his inclusion in this coolest of gangs, with the much-admired rebels that James and Sirius had been. On James's left was Lupin, even then a little shabby-looking, but he had the same air of delighted surprise at finding himself liked and included . . . or was it simply because Harry knew how it had been, that he saw these things in the picture? He tried to take it from the wall; it was his now, after all, Sirius had left him everything, but it would not budge. Sirius had taken no chances in preventing his parents from redecorating his room.

Harry looked around at the floor. The sky outside was growing brighter: A shaft of light revealed bits of paper, books, and small objects scattered over the carpet. Evidently Sirius's bedroom had been searched too, although its contents seemed to have been judged

mostly, if not entirely, worthless. A few of the books had been shaken roughly enough to part company with their covers, and sundry pages littered the floor.

Harry bent down, picked up a few of the pieces of paper, and examined them. He recognized one as part of an old edition of *A History of Magic*, by Bathilda Bagshot, and another as belonging to a motorcycle maintenance manual. The third was handwritten and crumpled. He smoothed it out.

Dear Padfoot,

Thank you thank you, for Harry's birthday present! It was his favorite by far. One year old and already zooming along on a toy broomstick, he looked so pleased with himself, I'm enclosing a picture so you can see. You know it only rises about two feet off the ground, but he nearly killed the cat and he smashed a horrible vase Petunia sent me for Christmas (no complaints there). Of course, James thought it was so funny, says he's going to be a great Quidditch player, but we've had to pack away all the ornaments and make sure we don't take our eyes off him when he gets going.

We had a very quiet birthday tea, just us and old Bathilda, who has always been sweet to us and who dotes on Harry. We were so sorry you couldn't come, but the Order's got to come first, and Harry's not old enough to know it's his birthday anyway! James is getting a bit frustrated shut up here, he tries not to show it but I can tell — also, Dumbledore's still got his Invisibility Cloak, so no chance of little excursions. If you could visit, it would cheer him up so much. Wormy was here

last weekend, I thought he seemed down, but that was probably the news about the McKinnons; I cried all evening when I heard.

Bathilda drops in most days, she's a fascinating old thing with the most amazing stories about Dumbledore, I'm not sure he'd be pleased if he knew! I don't know how much to believe, actually, because it seems incredible that Dumbledore

Harry's extremities seemed to have gone numb. He stood quite still, holding the miraculous paper in his nerveless fingers while inside him a kind of quiet eruption sent joy and grief thundering in equal measure through his veins. Lurching to the bed, he sat down.

He read the letter again, but could not take in any more meaning than he had done the first time, and was reduced to staring at the handwriting itself. She had made her "g"s the same way he did: He searched through the letter for every one of them, and each felt like a friendly little wave glimpsed from behind a veil. The letter was an incredible treasure, proof that Lily Potter had lived, really lived, that her warm hand had once moved across this parchment, tracing ink into these letters, these words, words about him, Harry, her son.

Impatiently brushing away the wetness in his eyes, he reread the letter, this time concentrating on the meaning. It was like listening to a half-remembered voice.

They had had a cat . . . perhaps it had perished, like his parents, at Godric's Hollow . . . or else fled when there was nobody left to feed it. . . . Sirius had bought him his first broomstick. . . . His parents had known Bathilda Bagshot; had Dumbledore introduced them?

Dumbledore's still got his Invisibility Cloak . . . There was something funny there. . . .

Harry paused, pondering his mother's words. Why had Dumbledore taken James's Invisibility Cloak? Harry distinctly remembered his headmaster telling him years before, "I don't need a cloak to become invisible." Perhaps some less gifted Order member had needed its assistance, and Dumbledore had acted as carrier? Harry passed on. . . .

Wormy was here . . . Pettigrew, the traitor, had seemed "down," had he? Was he aware that he was seeing James and Lily alive for the last time?

And finally Bathilda again, who told incredible stories about Dumbledore. *It seems incredible that Dumbledore* —

That Dumbledore what? But there were any number of things that would seem incredible about Dumbledore; that he had once received bottom marks in a Transfiguration test, for instance, or had taken up goat-charming like Aberforth. . . .

Harry got to his feet and scanned the floor: Perhaps the rest of the letter was here somewhere. He seized papers, treating them, in his eagerness, with as little consideration as the original searcher; he pulled open drawers, shook out books, stood on a chair to run his hand over the top of the wardrobe, and crawled under the bed and armchair.

At last, lying facedown on the floor, he spotted what looked like a torn piece of paper under the chest of drawers. When he pulled it out, it proved to be most of the photograph Lily had described in her letter. A black-haired baby was zooming in and out of the picture on a

tiny broom, roaring with laughter, and a pair of legs that must have belonged to James was chasing after him. Harry tucked the photograph into his pocket with Lily's letter and continued to look for the second sheet.

After another quarter of an hour, however, he was forced to conclude that the rest of his mother's letter was gone. Had it simply been lost in the sixteen years that had elapsed since it had been written, or had it been taken by whoever had searched the room? Harry read the first sheet again, this time looking for clues as to what might have made the second sheet valuable. His toy broomstick could hardly be considered interesting to the Death Eaters. . . . The only potentially useful thing he could see here was possible information on Dumbledore. *It seems incredible that Dumbledore* — what?

"Harry? Harry! *Harry!*"

"I'm here!" he called. "What's happened?"

There was a clatter of footsteps outside the door, and Hermione burst inside.

"We woke up and didn't know where you were!" she said breathlessly. She turned and shouted over her shoulder, "Ron! I've found him!"

Ron's annoyed voice echoed distantly from several floors below.

"Good! Tell him from me he's a git!"

"Harry, don't just disappear, please, we were terrified! Why did you come up here anyway?" She gazed around the ransacked room. "What have you been doing?"

"Look what I've just found."

He held out his mother's letter. Hermione took it and read it while

Harry watched her. When she reached the end of the page she looked up at him.

"Oh, Harry . . ."

"And there's this too."

He handed her the torn photograph, and Hermione smiled at the baby zooming in and out of sight on the toy broom.

"I've been looking for the rest of the letter," Harry said, "but it's not here."

Hermione glanced around.

"Did you make all this mess, or was some of it done when you got here?"

"Someone had searched before me," said Harry.

"I thought so. Every room I looked into on the way up had been disturbed. What were they after, do you think?"

"Information on the Order, if it was Snape."

"But you'd think he'd already have all he needed, I mean, he was *in* the Order, wasn't he?"

"Well then," said Harry, keen to discuss his theory, "what about information on Dumbledore? The second page of this letter, for instance. You know this Bathilda my mum mentions, you know who she is?"

"Who?"

"Bathilda Bagshot, the author of —"

"*A History of Magic,*" said Hermione, looking interested. "So your parents knew her? She was an incredible magical historian."

"And she's still alive," said Harry, "and she lives in Godric's

Hollow, Ron's Auntie Muriel was talking about her at the wedding. She knew Dumbledore's family too. Be pretty interesting to talk to, wouldn't she?"

There was a little too much understanding in the smile Hermione gave him for Harry's liking. He took back the letter and the photograph and tucked them inside the pouch around his neck, so as not to have to look at her and give himself away.

"I understand why you'd love to talk to her about your mum and dad, and Dumbledore too," said Hermione. "But that wouldn't really help us in our search for the Horcruxes, would it?" Harry did not answer, and she rushed on, "Harry, I know you really want to go to Godric's Hollow, but I'm scared, I'm scared at how easily those Death Eaters found us yesterday. It just makes me feel more than ever that we ought to avoid the place where your parents are buried, I'm sure they'd be expecting you to visit it."

"It's not just that," Harry said, still avoiding looking at her. "Muriel said stuff about Dumbledore at the wedding. I want to know the truth. . . ."

He told Hermione everything that Muriel had told him. When he had finished, Hermione said, "Of course, I can see why that's upset you, Harry —"

"I'm not upset," he lied, "I'd just like to know whether or not it's true or —"

"Harry, do you really think you'll get the truth from a malicious old woman like Muriel, or from Rita Skeeter? How can you believe them? You knew Dumbledore!"

"I thought I did," he muttered.

"But you know how much truth there was in everything Rita wrote about you! Doge is right, how can you let these people tarnish your memories of Dumbledore?"

He looked away, trying not to betray the resentment he felt. There it was again: Choose what to believe. He wanted the truth. Why was everybody so determined that he should not get it?

"Shall we go down to the kitchen?" Hermione suggested after a little pause. "Find something for breakfast?"

He agreed, but grudgingly, and followed her out onto the landing and past the second door that led off it. There were deep scratch marks in the paintwork below a small sign that he had not noticed in the dark. He paused at the top of the stairs to read it. It was a pompous little sign, neatly lettered by hand, the sort of thing that Percy Weasley might have stuck on his bedroom door:

Do Not Enter

Without the Express Permission of Regulus Arcturus Black

Excitement trickled through Harry, but he was not immediately sure why. He read the sign again. Hermione was already a flight of stairs below him.

"Hermione," he said, and he was surprised that his voice was so calm. "Come back up here."

"What's the matter?"

"R.A.B. I think I've found him."

There was a gasp, and then Hermione ran back up the stairs.

"In your mum's letter? But I didn't see —"

Harry shook his head, pointing at Regulus's sign. She read it, then clutched Harry's arm so tightly that he winced.

"Sirius's brother?" she whispered.

"He was a Death Eater," said Harry, "Sirius told me about him, he joined up when he was really young and then got cold feet and tried to leave — so they killed him."

"That fits!" gasped Hermione. "If he was a Death Eater he had access to Voldemort, and if he became disenchanted, then he would have wanted to bring Voldemort down!"

She released Harry, leaned over the banister, and screamed, "Ron! RON! Get up here, quick!"

Ron appeared, panting, a minute later, his wand ready in his hand.

"What's up? If it's massive spiders again I want breakfast before I —"

He frowned at the sign on Regulus's door, to which Hermione was silently pointing.

"What? That was Sirius's brother, wasn't it? Regulus Arcturus . . . Regulus . . . *R.A.B.*! The locket — you don't reckon — ?"

"Let's find out," said Harry. He pushed the door: It was locked. Hermione pointed her wand at the handle and said, *"Alohomora."* There was a click, and the door swung open.

They moved over the threshold together, gazing around. Regulus's bedroom was slightly smaller than Sirius's, though it had the same sense of former grandeur. Whereas Sirius had sought to advertise his difference from the rest of the family, Regulus had striven to emphasize the opposite. The Slytherin colors of emerald and silver were everywhere, draping the bed, the walls, and the windows. The

Black family crest was painstakingly painted over the bed, along with its motto, TOUJOURS PUR. Beneath this was a collection of yellow newspaper cuttings, all stuck together to make a ragged collage. Hermione crossed the room to examine them.

"They're all about Voldemort," she said. "Regulus seems to have been a fan for a few years before he joined the Death Eaters. . . ."

A little puff of dust rose from the bedcovers as she sat down to read the clippings. Harry, meanwhile, had noticed another photograph; a Hogwarts Quidditch team was smiling and waving out of the frame. He moved closer and saw the snakes emblazoned on their chests: Slytherins. Regulus was instantly recognizable as the boy sitting in the middle of the front row: He had the same dark hair and slightly haughty look of his brother, though he was smaller, slighter, and rather less handsome than Sirius had been.

"He played Seeker," said Harry.

"What?" said Hermione vaguely; she was still immersed in Voldemort's press clippings.

"He's sitting in the middle of the front row, that's where the Seeker . . . Never mind," said Harry, realizing that nobody was listening: Ron was on his hands and knees, searching under the wardrobe. Harry looked around the room for likely hiding places and approached the desk. Yet again, somebody had searched before them. The drawers' contents had been turned over recently, the dust disturbed, but there was nothing of value there: old quills, out-of-date textbooks that bore evidence of being roughly handled, a recently smashed ink bottle, its sticky residue covering the contents of the drawer.

"There's an easier way," said Hermione, as Harry wiped his inky fingers on his jeans. She raised her wand and said, *"Accio Locket!"*

Nothing happened. Ron, who had been searching the folds of the faded curtains, looked disappointed.

"Is that it, then? It's not here?"

"Oh, it could still be here, but under counter-enchantments," said Hermione. "Charms to prevent it being summoned magically, you know."

"Like Voldemort put on the stone basin in the cave," said Harry, remembering how he had been unable to Summon the fake locket.

"How are we supposed to find it then?" asked Ron.

"We search manually," said Hermione.

"That's a good idea," said Ron, rolling his eyes, and he resumed his examination of the curtains.

They combed every inch of the room for more than an hour, but were forced, finally, to conclude that the locket was not there.

The sun had risen now; its light dazzled them even through the grimy landing windows.

"It could be somewhere else in the house, though," said Hermione in a rallying tone as they walked back downstairs: As Harry and Ron had become more discouraged, she seemed to have become more determined. "Whether he'd managed to destroy it or not, he'd want to keep it hidden from Voldemort, wouldn't he? Remember all those awful things we had to get rid of when we were here last time? That clock that shot bolts at everyone and those old robes that tried to strangle Ron; Regulus might have put them there to protect the locket's hiding place, even though we didn't realize it at . . . at . . ."

Harry and Ron looked at her. She was standing with one foot in midair, with the dumbstruck look of one who had just been Obliviated; her eyes had even drifted out of focus.

". . . at the time," she finished in a whisper.

"Something wrong?" asked Ron.

"There was a locket."

"What?" said Harry and Ron together.

"In the cabinet in the drawing room. Nobody could open it. And we . . . we . . ."

Harry felt as though a brick had slid down through his chest into his stomach. He remembered: He had even handled the thing as they passed it around, each trying in turn to prise it open. It had been tossed into a sack of rubbish, along with the snuffbox of Wartcap powder and the music box that had made everyone sleepy. . . .

"Kreacher nicked loads of things back from us," said Harry. It was the only chance, the only slender hope left to them, and he was going to cling to it until forced to let go. "He had a whole stash of stuff in his cupboard in the kitchen. C'mon."

He ran down the stairs taking two steps at a time, the other two thundering along in his wake. They made so much noise that they woke the portrait of Sirius's mother as they passed through the hall.

"Filth! Mudbloods! Scum!" she screamed after them as they dashed down into the basement kitchen and slammed the door behind them.

Harry ran the length of the room, skidded to a halt at the door of Kreacher's cupboard, and wrenched it open. There was the nest of dirty old blankets in which the house-elf had once slept, but they

were no longer glittering with the trinkets Kreacher had salvaged. The only thing there was an old copy of *Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*. Refusing to believe his eyes, Harry snatched up the blankets and shook them. A dead mouse fell out and rolled dismally across the floor. Ron groaned as he threw himself into a kitchen chair; Hermione closed her eyes.

"It's not over yet," said Harry, and he raised his voice and called, *"Kreacher!"*

There was a loud *crack* and the house-elf that Harry had so reluctantly inherited from Sirius appeared out of nowhere in front of the cold and empty fireplace: tiny, half human-sized, his pale skin hanging off him in folds, white hair sprouting copiously from his batlike ears. He was still wearing the filthy rag in which they had first met him, and the contemptuous look he bent upon Harry showed that his attitude to his change of ownership had altered no more than his outfit.

"Master," croaked Kreacher in his bullfrog's voice, and he bowed low, muttering to his knees, "back in my Mistress's old house with the blood-traitor Weasley and the Mudblood —"

"I forbid you to call anyone 'blood traitor' or 'Mudblood,'" growled Harry. He would have found Kreacher, with his snoutlike nose and bloodshot eyes, a distinctly unlovable object even if the elf had not betrayed Sirius to Voldemort.

"I've got a question for you," said Harry, his heart beating rather fast as he looked down at the elf, "and I order you to answer it truthfully. Understand?"

"Yes, Master," said Kreacher, bowing low again: Harry saw his

lips moving soundlessly, undoubtedly framing the insults he was now forbidden to utter.

"Two years ago," said Harry, his heart now hammering against his ribs, "there was a big gold locket in the drawing room upstairs. We threw it out. Did you steal it back?"

There was a moment's silence, during which Kreacher straightened up to look Harry full in the face. Then he said, "Yes."

"Where is it now?" asked Harry jubilantly as Ron and Hermione looked gleeful.

Kreacher closed his eyes as though he could not bear to see their reactions to his next word.

"Gone."

"Gone?" echoed Harry, elation flooding out of him. "What do you mean, it's gone?"

The elf shivered. He swayed.

"Kreacher," said Harry fiercely, "I order you —"

"Mundungus Fletcher," croaked the elf, his eyes still tight shut. "Mundungus Fletcher stole it all: Miss Bella's and Miss Cissy's pictures, my Mistress's gloves, the Order of Merlin, First Class, the goblets with the family crest, and — and —"

Kreacher was gulping for air: His hollow chest was rising and falling rapidly, then his eyes flew open and he uttered a bloodcurdling scream.

" — and the locket, Master Regulus's locket, Kreacher did wrong, Kreacher failed in his orders!"

Harry reacted instinctively: As Kreacher lunged for the poker standing in the grate, he launched himself upon the elf, flattening him.

Hermione's scream mingled with Kreacher's, but Harry bellowed louder than both of them: "Kreacher, I order you to stay still!"

He felt the elf freeze and released him. Kreacher lay flat on the cold stone floor, tears gushing from his sagging eyes.

"Harry, let him up!" Hermione whispered.

"So he can beat himself up with the poker?" snorted Harry, kneeling beside the elf. "I don't think so. Right, Kreacher, I want the truth: How do you know Mundungus Fletcher stole the locket?"

"Kreacher saw him!" gasped the elf as tears poured over his snout and into his mouth full of graying teeth. "Kreacher saw him coming out of Kreacher's cupboard with his hands full of Kreacher's treasures. Kreacher told the sneak thief to stop, but Mundungus Fletcher laughed and r-ran. . . ."

"You called the locket 'Master Regulus's,'" said Harry. "Why? Where did it come from? What did Regulus have to do with it? Kreacher, sit up and tell me everything you know about that locket, and everything Regulus had to do with it!"

The elf sat up, curled into a ball, placed his wet face between his knees, and began to rock backward and forward. When he spoke, his voice was muffled but quite distinct in the silent, echoing kitchen.

"Master Sirius ran away, good riddance, for he was a bad boy and broke my Mistress's heart with his lawless ways. But Master Regulus had proper pride; he knew what was due to the name of Black and the dignity of his pure blood. For years he talked of the Dark Lord, who was going to bring the wizards out of hiding to rule the Muggles and the Muggle-borns . . . and when he was sixteen years old, Master Regulus joined the Dark Lord. So proud, so proud, so

happy to serve . . .

"And one day, a year after he had joined, Master Regulus came down to the kitchen to see Kreacher. Master Regulus always liked Kreacher. And Master Regulus said . . . he said . . .

The old elf rocked faster than ever.

". . . he said that the Dark Lord required an elf."

"Voldemort needed an *elf*?" Harry repeated, looking around at Ron and Hermione, who looked just as puzzled as he did.

"Oh yes," moaned Kreacher. "And Master Regulus had volunteered Kreacher. It was an honor, said Master Regulus, an honor for him and for Kreacher, who must be sure to do whatever the Dark Lord ordered him to do . . . and then to c-come home."

Kreacher rocked still faster, his breath coming in sobs.

"So Kreacher went to the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord did not tell Kreacher what they were to do, but took Kreacher with him to a cave beside the sea. And beyond the cave there was a cavern, and in the cavern was a great black lake . . ."

The hairs on the back of Harry's neck stood up. Kreacher's croaking voice seemed to come to him from across that dark water. He saw what had happened as clearly as though he had been present.

". . . There was a boat . . ."

Of course there had been a boat; Harry knew the boat, ghostly green and tiny, bewitched so as to carry one wizard and one victim toward the island in the center. This, then, was how Voldemort had tested the defenses surrounding the Horcrux: by borrowing a disposable creature, a house-elf . . .

"There was a b-basin full of potion on the island. The D-Dark

Lord made Kreacher drink it. . . .”

The elf quaked from head to foot.

“Kreacher drank, and as he drank, he saw terrible things . . . . Kreacher’s insides burned . . . Kreacher cried for Master Regulus to save him, he cried for his Mistress Black, but the Dark Lord only laughed . . . He made Kreacher drink all the potion . . . He dropped a locket into the empty basin. . . . He filled it with more potion.

“And then the Dark Lord sailed away, leaving Kreacher on the island. . . .”

Harry could see it happening. He watched Voldemort’s white, snakelike face vanishing into darkness, those red eyes fixed pitilessly on the thrashing elf whose death would occur within minutes, whenever he succumbed to the desperate thirst that the burning potion caused its victim. . . . But here, Harry’s imagination could go no further, for he could not see how Kreacher had escaped.

“Kreacher needed water, he crawled to the island’s edge and he drank from the black lake . . . and hands, dead hands, came out of the water and dragged Kreacher under the surface. . . .”

“How did you get away?” Harry asked, and he was not surprised to hear himself whispering.

Kreacher raised his ugly head and looked at Harry with his great, bloodshot eyes.

“Master Regulus told Kreacher to come back,” he said.

“I know — but how did you escape the Inferi?”

Kreacher did not seem to understand.

“Master Regulus told Kreacher to come back,” he repeated.

“I know, but —”

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it, Harry?” said Ron. “He Disapparated!”

“But . . . you couldn’t Apparate in and out of that cave,” said Harry, “otherwise Dumbledore —”

“Elf magic isn’t like wizard’s magic, is it?” said Ron. “I mean, they can Apparate and Disapparate in and out of Hogwarts when we can’t.”

There was silence as Harry digested this. How could Voldemort have made such a mistake? But even as he thought this, Hermione spoke, and her voice was icy.

“Of course, Voldemort would have considered the ways of house-elves far beneath his notice, just like all the purebloods who treat them like animals . . . It would never have occurred to him that they might have magic that he didn’t.”

“The house-elf’s highest law is his Master’s bidding,” intoned Kreacher. “Kreacher was told to come home, so Kreacher came home. . . .”

“Well, then, you did what you were told, didn’t you?” said Hermione kindly. “You didn’t disobey orders at all!”

Kreacher shook his head, rocking as fast as ever.

“So what happened when you got back?” Harry asked. “What did Regulus say when you told him what had happened?”

“Master Regulus was very worried, very worried,” croaked Kreacher. “Master Regulus told Kreacher to stay hidden and not to leave the house. And then . . . it was a little while later . . . Master Regulus came to find Kreacher in his cupboard one night, and Master Regulus was strange, not as he usually was, disturbed in his mind, Kreacher could tell . . . and he asked Kreacher to take him to the

cave, the cave where Kreacher had gone with the Dark Lord. . . .”

And so they had set off. Harry could visualize them quite clearly, the frightened old elf and the thin, dark Seeker who had so resembled Sirius. . . . Kreacher knew how to open the concealed entrance to the underground cavern, knew how to raise the tiny boat; this time it was his beloved Regulus who sailed with him to the island with its basin of poison. . . .

“And he made you drink the potion?” said Harry, disgusted.

But Kreacher shook his head and wept. Hermione’s hands leapt to her mouth: She seemed to have understood something.

“M-Master Regulus took from his pocket a locket like the one the Dark Lord had,” said Kreacher, tears pouring down either side of his snoutlike nose. “And he told Kreacher to take it and, when the basin was empty, to switch the lockets. . . .”

Kreacher’s sobs came in great rasps now; Harry had to concentrate hard to understand him.

“And he ordered — Kreacher to leave — without him. And he told Kreacher — to go home — and never to tell my Mistress — what he had done — but to destroy — the first locket. And he drank — all the potion — and Kreacher swapped the lockets — and watched . . . as Master Regulus . . . was dragged beneath the water . . . and . . .”

“Oh, Kreacher!” wailed Hermione, who was crying. She dropped to her knees beside the elf and tried to hug him. At once he was on his feet, cringing away from her, quite obviously repulsed.

“The Mudblood touched Kreacher, he will not allow it, what would his Mistress say?”

“I told you not to call her ‘Mudblood’!” snarled Harry, but the elf

was already punishing himself: He fell to the ground and banged his forehead on the floor.

"Stop him — stop him!" Hermione cried. "Oh, don't you see now how sick it is, the way they've got to obey?"

"Kreacher — stop, stop!" shouted Harry.

The elf lay on the floor, panting and shivering, green mucus glistening around his snout, a bruise already blooming on his pallid forehead where he had struck himself, his eyes swollen and bloodshot and swimming in tears. Harry had never seen anything so pitiful.

"So you brought the locket home," he said relentlessly, for he was determined to know the full story. "And you tried to destroy it?"

"Nothing Kreacher did made any mark upon it," moaned the elf. "Kreacher tried everything, everything he knew, but nothing, nothing would work. . . . So many powerful spells upon the casing, Kreacher was sure the way to destroy it was to get inside it, but it would not open. . . . Kreacher punished himself, he tried again, he punished himself, he tried again. Kreacher failed to obey orders, Kreacher could not destroy the locket! And his Mistress was mad with grief, because Master Regulus had disappeared, and Kreacher could not tell her what had happened, no, because Master Regulus had f-f-forbidden him to tell any of the f-f-family what happened in the c-cave. . . ."

Kreacher began to sob so hard that there were no more coherent words. Tears flowed down Hermione's cheeks as she watched Kreacher, but she did not dare touch him again. Even Ron, who was no fan of Kreacher's, looked troubled. Harry sat back on his heels

and shook his head, trying to clear it.

"I don't understand you, Kreacher," he said finally. "Voldemort tried to kill you, Regulus died to bring Voldemort down, but you were still happy to betray Sirius to Voldemort? You were happy to go to Narcissa and Bellatrix, and pass information to Voldemort through them. . . ."

"Harry, Kreacher doesn't think like that," said Hermione, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand. "He's a slave; house-elves are used to bad, even brutal treatment; what Voldemort did to Kreacher wasn't that far out of the common way. What do wizard wars mean to an elf like Kreacher? He's loyal to people who are kind to him, and Mrs. Black must have been, and Regulus certainly was, so he served them willingly and parroted their beliefs. I know what you're going to say," she went on as Harry began to protest, "that Regulus changed his mind . . . but he doesn't seem to have explained that to Kreacher, does he? And I think I know why. Kreacher and Regulus's family were all safer if they kept to the old pure-blood line. Regulus was trying to protect them all."

"Sirius —"

"Sirius was horrible to Kreacher, Harry, and it's no good looking like that, you know it's true. Kreacher had been alone for a long time when Sirius came to live here, and he was probably starving for a bit of affection. I'm sure 'Miss Cissy' and 'Miss Bella' were perfectly lovely to Kreacher when he turned up, so he did them a favor and told them everything they wanted to know. I've said all along that wizards would pay for how they treat house-elves. Well, Voldemort did . . . and so did Sirius."

Harry had no retort. As he watched Kreacher sobbing on the floor, he remembered what Dumbledore had said to him, mere hours after Sirius's death: *I do not think Sirius ever saw Kreacher as a being with feelings as acute as a human's. . . .*

"Kreacher," said Harry after a while, "when you feel up to it, er . . . please sit up."

It was several minutes before Kreacher hiccuped himself into silence. Then he pushed himself into a sitting position again, rubbing his knuckles into his eyes like a small child.

"Kreacher, I am going to ask you to do something," said Harry. He glanced at Hermione for assistance. He wanted to give the order kindly, but at the same time, he could not pretend that it was not an order. However, the change in his tone seemed to have gained her approval: She smiled encouragingly.

"Kreacher, I want you, please, to go and find Mundungus Fletcher. We need to find out where the locket — where Master Regulus's locket is. It's really important. We want to finish the work Master Regulus started, we want to — er — ensure that he didn't die in vain."

Kreacher dropped his fists and looked up at Harry.

"Find Mundungus Fletcher?" he croaked.

"And bring him here, to Grimmauld Place," said Harry. "Do you think you could do that for us?"

As Kreacher nodded and got to his feet, Harry had a sudden inspiration. He pulled out Hagrid's purse and took out the fake Horcrux, the substitute locket in which Regulus had placed the note to Voldemort.

"Kreacher, I'd, er, like you to have this," he said, pressing the locket into the elf's hand. "This belonged to Regulus and I'm sure he'd want you to have it as a token of gratitude for what you —"

"Overkill, mate," said Ron as the elf took one look at the locket, let out a howl of shock and misery, and threw himself back onto the ground.

It took them nearly half an hour to calm down Kreacher, who was so overcome to be presented with a Black family heirloom for his very own that he was too weak at the knees to stand properly. When finally he was able to totter a few steps they all accompanied him to his cupboard, watched him tuck up the locket safely in his dirty blankets, and assured him that they would make its protection their first priority while he was away. He then made two low bows to Harry and Ron, and even gave a funny little spasm in Hermione's direction that might have been an attempt at a respectful salute, before Disapparating with the usual loud *crack*.

HOOFSTUK TIEN

Skepsel se Storie

Harry word die volgende oggend vroeg wakker, toegewikkel in 'n slaapsak op die sitkamervloer. 'n Skrefie lig is sigbaar tussen die swaar gordyne: dit is die koel, suiwer blou van verdunde ink, iewers tussen nag en dagbreek, en alles is stil, afgesien van Ron en Hermione se stadige, diep asemhaling. Harry kyk na hulle donker fatsoene op die vloer langs hom. Ron het 'n aanval van ridderlikheid gehad en daarop aangedring dat Hermione op die rusbank se kussings slaap sodat haar silhoeët nou hoër as syne is. Haar arm hang gebuig af vloer toe, haar vingers 'n entjie van Ron s'n af. Harry wonder of hulle aan die slaap geraak het terwyl hulle hande vasgehou het. Die gedagte daaraan laat hom vreemd eensaam voel.

Hy kyk op na die plafon se skaduwees en die kroonkandelaar vol spinnerakke. Minder as vier-en-twintig uur gelede het hy in die sonlig by die markiestent se ingang gestaan en wag om bruilofsgaste na hulle sitplekke te begelei. Dit voel soos 'n leeftyd gelede. Wat gaan nou gebeur? Hy lê en dink aan die Horcruxe, aan die oorweldigende, ingewikkelde sending wat Dumbledore vir hom agtergelaat het . . . Dumbledore . . .

Die verdriet wat sedert Dumbledore se dood so besit van hom geneem het, voel nou anders. Dit is asof die aantygings wat hy Muriel by die troue hoor maak het soos kieme in sy brein nesgemaak het en sy herinneringe aan die towenaar wat hy verafgood het, nou besmet. Het Dumbledore toegelaat dat sulke dinge gebeur? Was hy soos Dudley tevrede om verwaarlosing en mishandeling te sien gebeur solank dit hom nie raak nie? Het hy sy rug gedraai op 'n suster wat gevange gehou en weggesteek is?

Harry dink aan Godric's Hollow, aan grafte daar wat Dumbledore nooit genoem het nie; hy dink aan geheimsinnige voorwerpe wat sonder verduideliking in Dumbledore se testament nagelaat is, en sy wrewel word al hoe groter in die duister. Hoekom het Dumbledore hom nie vertel nie? Hoekom het hy nie verduidelik nie? Het Dumbledore ooit regtig vir Harry omgegee? Of was Harry niks meer as

'n instrument om blink te vryf en te slyp, maar nooit te vertrou, nooit in sy vertroue te neem nie?

Harry kan dit nie verdra om hier te lê met niks anders as bitter gedagtes vir geselskap nie. Desperaat vir iets om te doen, vir afleiding, glip hy uit sy slaapsak, tel sy towerstaf op en kruip by die kamer uit. Op die trapportaal fluister hy *"Lumos"* en beweeg by towerstaflig met die trap op.

Op die tweede trapportaal is die kamer waar hy en Ron geslaap het toe hulle die vorige keer hier was; hy loer in. Die hangkasdeure staan oop en die beddegoed is teruggepluk. Harry onthou die omgevalde trolbeen onder. Het iemand die huis deursoek vandat die Orde hier weg is? Snape? Of miskien Mundungus wat baie uit hierdie huis gesteel het, sowel voor as ná Sirius se dood? Harry se blik dwaal na die portret wat soms Phineas Nigellus Black, Sirius se oor-oorgrootvader bevat, maar dit is leeg en toon niks behalwe 'n stuk modderige agtergrond nie. Phineas Nigellus bring die nag duidelik in die skoolhoof se studeerkamer in Hogwarts deur.

Harry gaan verder met die trap op tot hy by die boonste trapportaal kom waar daar net twee deure is. Op die een voor hom is 'n naamplaatjie waarop daar *Sirius* staan. Harry was nog nooit tevore in sy peetpa se slaapkamer nie. Hy stoot die deur oop en hou sy towerstaf hoog om die lig so wyd moontlik te laat skyn.

Die vertrek is ruim en moes eens op 'n tyd deftig gewees het. Daar is 'n groot bed met 'n houtsneekopstuk, 'n hoë venster verberg deur lang fluweelgordyne en 'n kroonkandelaar met 'n dik laag stof op en kersstompies met soliede was wat soos ysdruppels afhang nog in die kerspype. 'n Dun stoflagie bedek die foto's teen die mure en die bed se kopstuk; 'n spinnerak strek tussen die kroonkandelaar en die top van die groot houthangkas, en soos Harry verder by die vertrek inloop, hoor hy hoe skarrel die versteurde muise weg.

Die tienderjarige Sirius het die mure met soveel plakkate en foto's beplak dat daar weinig van die mure se silwergrys sybedekking sigbaar is. Harry veronderstel Sirius se ouers kon nie die Permanente Kleefspreuk wat dit alles teen die muur vashou, verwyder nie, want hy is seker hulle sou nie waardering vir hulle oudste seun se dekorsmaak gehad het nie. Sirius het blykbaar uit sy pad gegaan om sy ouers te versondig. Daar is verskeie groot Gryffindorbaniere, wat skarlakenrooi en goud verbleik het, net om sy andersheid as die res van die Slytherinfamilie te onderstreep. Daar is baie foto's van Moggelmotorfietse en ook (Harry moet Sirius se moed bewonder) verskeie plakkate van Moggelmeisies in bikini's; Harry kan sien hulle is Moggels, want hulle bly heeltemal beweginloos in hulle foto's met dowwe

glimlagte en glaserige oë op die papier vasgevries. Dit is in teenstelling met die enigste towerfoto teen die mure van vier Hogwartsstudente wat by mekaar ingehaak staan en vir die kamera lag.

Met 'n opwelling van vreugde herken Harry sy pa; sy deurmekaar swart hare staan net soos Harry s'n agter regop en hy dra ook bril. Langs hom staan Sirius, traak-my-nieagtig aantreklik, sy effens arrogante gesig soveel jonger en gelukkiger as wat Harry dit ooit gesien het toe hy nog gelewe het. Regs van Sirius staan Pettigrew, meer as 'n kop korter, geset en met waterige oë, bloesend van blydskap om deel te wees van hierdie coolste van alle bendes saam met rebelle soos James en Sirius wat deur almal bewonder word. Links van James staan Lupin, wat selfs toe al 'n effens slordige indruk gemaak het, maar net so bly en verras lyk dat hy as goed genoeg beskou is om ingesluit te word . . . of is dit net omdat Harry weet hoe sake gestaan het dat hy daardie dinge in die foto inlees? Hy probeer dit van die muur af kry; dit is per slot van rekening nou syne – Sirius het alles aan hom bemaak – maar dit verroer nie. Sirius het nie enige kanse gevat toe hy gekeer het dat sy ouers sy kamer herversier nie.

Harry kyk op die vloer rond. Die lug buite word helderder: 'n skag lig skyn op stukkies papier, boeke en klein voorwerpe wat oor die mat rondgestrooi lê. Sirius se slaapkamer is klaarblyklik ook deursoek, hoewel die inhoud blykbaar meestal, indien nie heeltemal nie, waardeloos bevind is. 'n Paar van die boeke is so woes geskud dat hulle omslae afgeskeur het en allerhande bladsye lê oor die vloer gesaai.

Harry buk af, tel 'n paar van die stukkies papier op en bekyk dit. Hy herken een as deel van 'n ou uitgawe van *'n Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns* deur Bathilda Bagshot en 'n ander een as komende uit 'n handleiding vir motorfietsonderhoud. Die derde een is handgeskrewe en opgefrommel; hy stryk dit glad.

Liewe Kussingvoet

Dankie, dankie vir Harry se verjaardagpresent! Dit was verreweg sy gunsteling. Een jaar oud en hy zoem al klaar op 'n speelgoedbesemstok rond – hy het so in sy skik met homself gelyk! Ek sluit 'n foto in sodat jy kan sien. Weet jy, dit styg omtrent net twee voet van die grond af op, maar hy het die kat amper doodgemaak en 'n aaklige vaas wat Petunia vir my vir Kersfees gestuur het, flenters gebreek (ek kla nie). James het natuurlik gedink dis vreeslik snaaks en het gesê hy gaan 'n briljante Kwiddiekspeler wees, maar ons moes al die ornamente wegpak en maak nou seker ons hou hom heeltyd dop as hy begin rondrits.

Ons het 'n baie stil verjaardagtee gehou, net ons en ou Bathilda wat altyd so dierbaar met ons is en versot is op Harry. Ons was so jammer jy kon nie kom nie, maar die Orde moet eerste kom en Harry is in elk geval nie oud genoeg om te weet dis sy verjaardag nie! James raak 'n bietjie gefrustreerd om so hier vasgekluister te wees. Hy probeer dit wegsteek, maar ek kan dit sien – Dumbledore het nog steeds sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel, so daar is nie sprake van enige uitstappies nie. As jy kan kom kuier, sal dit hom baie opbeur. Wurmpie was verlede naweek hier. Ek het gedink hy lyk af, maar dit was seker die nuus oor die McKinnons. Ek het heelaand gehuil toe ek dit hoor.

Bathilda val die meeste dae hier in. Sy's 'n fassinerende ou tante wat die verstommendste stories oor Dumbledore vertel – ek dink nie hy sal so gelukkig daaroor wees nie! Ek weet eintlik nie hoeveel om te glo nie, want dit voel ongelooflik dat Dumbledore

Dit voel of Harry se hande en voete verdoof het. Hy staan heeltemal bewegingloos en hou die wonderbaarlike vel papier tussen sy lewelose vingers vas terwyl 'n soort stille ontploffing binne-in hom dawerend ewe groot dosisse blydskap en hartseer deur sy are stuur. Hy steier tot by die bed en gaan sit.

Hy lees die brief weer, maar kan nie meer daaruit wys word as die eerste keer nie en staar dan maar weer net na die handskrif self. Sy het haar g's net soos syne gemaak: hy soek elke enkele een van hulle in die brief en elkeen voel soos 'n vriendelike klein wuifgebaar wat hy vlugtig van agter 'n sluier sien. Die brief is 'n ongelooflike skat, 'n bewys dat Lily Potter gelewe het, regtig gelewe het, dat haar warm hand lank gelede oor hierdie perkament beweeg het en hierdie letters, hierdie woorde met ink gevorm het, woorde oor hom, Harry, haar seun.

Hy vee die nattigheid in sy oë ongeduldig weg, lees die brief weer en konsentreer hierdie keer op die betekenis. Dit is soos om na 'n halfvergete stem te luister.

Hulle het 'n kat gehad . . . miskien is hy net soos sy ouers in Godric's Hollow dood . . . of anders het hy dalk gevlug toe daar niemand oor was om hom te voer nie . . . Sirius het vir hom sy eerste besemstok gekoop . . . Sy ouers het Bathilda Bagshot geken; het Dumbledore hulle aan mekaar voorgestel? *Dumbledore het nog steeds sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel* . . . Daar is iets snaaks hier . . .

Harry dink vir 'n oomblik oor sy ma se woorde na. Hoekom het Dumbledore James se Onsigbaarheidsmantel gevat? Harry onthou duidelik hoe die skoolhoof jare gelede vir hom gesê het: "*Ek het nie 'n mantel nodig om onsigbaar te word nie.*" Miskien het 'n minder be-

aalde lid van die Orde dit nodig gehad en het Dumbledore dit weggegee? Harry lees verder . . .

Wurmpie was hier . . . Pettigrew, die verraaier, het "af" gelyk. Het hy geweet hy sien James en Lily vir die laaste keer lewend?

En uiteindelik weer Bathilda, wat ongelooflike stories oor Dumbledore vertel het. *Dit voel ongelooflik dat Dumbledore –*

Dat Dumbledore wat? Maar daar is 'n hele paar dinge omtrent Dumbledore wat ongelooflik voel: dat hy byvoorbeeld eenkeer die slegste punte in 'n Transfigurasietoets gekry het, of dat hy bokke begin betower het soos Aberforth . . .

Harry staan op en fynkam die vloer: miskien is die res van die brief hier iewers. Hy gryp papiere en behandel hulle in sy gretigheid met net so min respek soos die oorspronklike soeker; hy trek laaie oop, skud boeke uit, staan op 'n stoel om sy hand oor die hangkas se bokant te laat gly en kruip onder die bed en leunstoel in.

Uiteindelik lê hy met sy gesig plat op die vloer en gewaar iets wat lyk na 'n geskeurde stukkie papier onder die laaikas. Toe hy dit uittrek, sien hy dit is die grootste deel van die foto wat Lily in haar brief beskryf het. 'n Swartkop baba zoem skaterend van die lag op 'n klein besempie by die foto in en uit, en twee bene wat James s'n moet gewees het, hardloop agter hom aan. Harry steek die foto saam met Lily se brief in sy sak en hou aan soek na die tweede vel.

Ná nog 'n kwartier kom hy egter noodgedwonge tot die slotsom dat die res van sy ma se brief weg is. Het dit net weggeraak in die sestien jaar wat verby is vandat dit geskryf is, of het wie ook al hierdie kamer deursoek het dit gevat? Harry lees die eerste vel weer en soek hierdie keer na leidrade oor wat die tweede vel waardevol kon gemaak het. Sy speelgoed-besemstok kan die Doodseters tog beswaarlik interesseer . . . die enigste potensieel nuttige ding wat hy hier kan sien, is moontlike inligting oor Dumbledore. *Dit voel ongelooflik dat Dumbledore* – wat?

"Harry? Harry! *Harry!*"

"Ek's hier!" roep hy. "Wat makeer?"

Daar is 'n gekletter van voetstappe buite die deur en Hermione kom ingebars.

"Ons het wakker geword en nie geweet waar jy is nie!" sê sy uitasem. Sy draai haar kop en skree oor haar skouer: "Ron! Ek het hom gekry!"

Ron se omgekrapte stem eggo van verskeie verdiepings ondertoe af.

"Mooi! Sê vir hom ek sê hy's 'n mamparra!"

"Harry, moet asseblief nie net verdwyn nie; ons was doodver-

skrik! Hoekom het jy in elk geval hiernatoe opgekom?" Sy kyk in die gefynkamde kamer rond. "Wat het jy hier aangevang?"

"Kyk wat het ek nou net gekry."

Hy hou sy ma se brief uit. Hermione vat en lees dit terwyl Harry haar dophou. Toe sy aan die einde van die bladsy kom, kyk sy op na hom.

"O, Harry . . ."

"En daar's dit ook."

Hy gee vir haar die geskeurde foto en Hermione glimlag vir die baba op die die speelgoedbesem wat so in en uit die foto zoem.

"Ek het na die res van die brief gesoek," sê Harry, "maar dis nie hier nie."

Hermione kyk rond.

"Het jy alles so omgekrap, of was dit al deurmekaar toe jy hier kom?"

"Iemand het voor my hier kom rondsoek," sê Harry.

"Ek dog so. Elke kamer waarby ek op pad boontoe ingeloer het, is onderstebo. Wat dink jy het hulle gesoek?"

"Inligting oor die Orde, as dit Snape was."

"Maar ek sou dink hy't klaar alles wat hy nodig het, ek bedoel, hy was *in* die Orde, nie waar nie?"

"Wel," sê Harry, gretig om sy teorie te bespreek, "wat dan van inligting oor Dumbledore? Die tweede bladsy van hierdie brief, byvoorbeeld. Hierdie Bathilda van wie my ma skryf; weet jy wie sy is?"

"Wie?"

"Bathilda Bagshot, die skrywer van –"

"*'n Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns,*" sê Hermione en lyk geïnteresseerd. "So jou ouers het haar geken? Sy was 'n ongelooflike towerkrag-historikus."

"En sy lewe nog," sê Harry, "en sy woon in Godric's Hollow; Ron se tant Muriel het by die troue van haar gepraat. Sy het Dumbledore se familie ook geken. Sal interessant wees om met haar te praat, dink jy nie?"

Daar is 'n bietjie te veel begrip na Harry se sin in die glimlag wat Hermione vir hom gee. Hy vat die brief en die foto terug en druk dit in die sakkie om sy nek sodat hy nie na haar hoef te kyk en homself verraai nie.

"Ek verstaan hoekom jy dolgraag met haar oor jou ma en pa en ook Dumbledore sal wil gesels," sê Hermione. "Maar dit sal ons nie regtig help om die Horcruxe te kry nie, sal dit?" Harry antwoord nie en sy gaan vinnig verder: "Harry, ek weet jy wil baie graag Godric's Hollow toe gaan, maar ek's bang . . . Dit maak my bang dat daai

Doodvreters ons gister so maklik gekry het. Dit laat my net meer as ooit voel ons moet die plek waar jou ouers begrawe is, vermy; ek is seker hulle verwag dat jy soontoe sal wil gaan."

"Dis nie net dit nie," sê Harry, wat nog steeds nie na haar wil kyk nie. "Muriel het by die troue goed oor Dumbledore gesê. Ek wil weet wat die waarheid is . . ."

Hy vertel Hermione alles wat Muriel hom vertel het. Toe hy klaar is, sê Hermione: "Natuurlik kan ek sien hoekom dit jou ontstel het, Harry –"

"Ek is nie ontsteld nie," lieg hy. "Ek wil net graag weet of dit waar is of nie, of –"

"Harry, dink jy regtig jy gaan die waarheid uit 'n hatige ou vrou soos Muriel kry, of uit Rita Skeeter? Hoe kan jy hulle glo? Jy't Dumbledore geken!"

"Ek't gedink ek het," mompel hy.

"Maar jy weet tog hoeveel waarheid daar in alles wat Rita oor jou geskryf het gesteek het! Doge is reg: hoe kan jy toelaat dat daardie mense jou herinneringe aan Dumbledore besoedel?"

Hy kyk weg en probeer om nie sy wrewel te wys nie. Hier is dit weer: kies wat jy wil glo. Hy soek die waarheid. Hoekom is almal so vasberade dat hy nie moet uitvind wat dit is nie?

"Sal ons af kombuis toe gaan?" stel Hermione ná 'n kort stilte voor. "Dan kry ons iets vir ontbyt."

Hy stem in, maar teensinnig, en volg haar uit na die trapportaal en verby die tweede deur wat daaruit lei. Daar is diep krapmerke in die verfwerk onder 'n klein kennisgewing wat hy nie in die donker opgemerk het nie. Hy gaan staan aan die bokant van die trap om dit te lees. Dit is 'n deftige kennisgewing wat netjies met die hand geskryf is; die soort ding wat Percy Weasley op sy kamerdeur sou gesit het:

Geen Toegang
Sonder Uitdruklike Toestemming van
Regulus Arcturus Black

Opwinding sypel deur Harry, maar hy is nie dadelik seker hoekom nie. Hy lees die kennisgewing weer. Hermione is al 'n stel trappe onder hom.

"Hermione," sê hy en is verbaas dat sy stem so kalm is. "Kom terug boontoe."

"Wat makeer?"

"R.A.B. Ek dink ek het hom gekry."

Daar is 'n snak en dan hardloop Hermione terug met die trap op.

"In jou ma se brief? Maar ek het niks gesien –"

Harry skud sy kop en wys na Regulus se kennisgewing. Sy lees dit en gryp Harry se arm dan so styf vas dat hy ineenkrimp.

"Sirius se broer?" fluister sy.

"Hy was 'n Doodseter," sê Harry. "Sirius het my van hom vertel. Hy het aangesluit toe hy nog baie jonk was en toe koue voete gekry en probeer wegkom – toe maak hulle hom dood."

"Dit maak sin!" snak Hermione. "As hy 'n Doodseter was, het hy toegang tot Voldemort gehad, en as hy ontnugter geraak het, sou hy Voldemort tot 'n val wou bring!"

Sy los Harry se arm, leun oor die trapreling en roep: "Ron! RON! Kom op boontoe, gou!"

Ron verskyn 'n minuut later uitasem met sy towerstaf gereed in sy hand.

"Wassit? As dit weer massiewe spinnekoppe is, ek wil eers ontbyt eet voor ek –"

Hy kyk fronsend na die kennisgewing op Regulus se deur waarna Hermione woordeloos wys.

"Wat? Dit was Sirius se broer, dan nie? Regulus Arcturus . . . Regulus . . . *R.A.B.!* Die hangertjie – Dink julle –?"

"Kom ons vind uit," sê Harry. Hy voel aan die deur; dit is gesluit. Hermione rig haar towerstaf op die handvatsel en sê: "*Alohomora.*" Daar is 'n klikgeluid en die deur swaai oop.

Hulle tree saam oor die drumpel en kyk rond. Regulus se kamer is effens kleiner as Sirius s'n, hoewel dit dieselfde gevoel van eertydse praal het. Terwyl Sirius probeer adverteer het hoe anders as die res van die familie hy is, het Regulus daarna gestreef om die teenoorgestelde te beklemtoon. Slytherin se smarag en silwer kleure is oral: gedrapeer oor die bed, teen die mure en die vensters. Die Blacks se familiewapen is pynlik presies bokant die bed geverf, saam met die leuse, *Toujours Pur*. Daaronder is daar 'n versameling geel koerantknipsels wat saam vasgeplak is om 'n verflenterde collage te vorm. Hermione stap deur die kamer om dit te bekyk.

"Dit gaan alles oor Voldemort," sê sy. "Dit lyk of Regulus vir 'n paar jaar 'n bewonderaar was voor hy by die Doodseters aangesluit het . . ."

'n Stofwolkie styg op uit die beddegoed toe sy gaan sit om die knipsels te lees. Harry het intussen 'n ander foto raakgesien: 'n Hogwarts Kwiddiekspan wat glimlag en uit die raam wuif. Hy beweeg nader en sien die slange wat op hulle borskaste pryk: Slytherins. Regulus is dadelik herkenbaar as die seun wat in die middel van die voorste ry sit: hy het dieselfde donker hare en effens hooghartige

uitdrukking as sy broer, al is hy kleiner, skraler en enigsins minder aantreklik as wat Sirius was.

"Hy't Soeker gespeel," sê Harry.

"Wat?" sê Hermione vaagweg; sy is nog steeds verdiep in die koerantknipsels oor Voldemort.

"Hy sit in die middel van die voorste ry; dis waar die Soeker . . . Vergeet dit," sê Harry wat besef niemand luister nie: Ron soek op sy hande en knieë onder die hangkas rond. Harry kyk deur die kamer vir moontlike wegsteekplekke en beweeg dan na die lessenaar. Iemand het weer eens voor hulle hier kom rondsoek. Die laaie se inhoud is onlangs deurmekaargekrap; die stof is versteur, maar daar is niks waardevols hier nie: ou veerpenne, verouderde handboeke wat tekens van hardhandige hantering toon, 'n inkbottel wat kort gelede gebreek het en waarvan die taai oorblyfsels die laai se inhoud bedek.

"Daar's 'n makliker manier," sê Hermione terwyl Harry sy inkbesmeerde vingers aan sy jeans afvee. Sy lig haar towerstaf en sê: "*Accio hangertjie!*"

Niks gebeur nie. Ron, wat in die verbleikte gordyne se voue rondgesoek het, lyk teleurgesteld.

"Is dit dan dít? Dis nie hier nie?"

"O, dit kan dalk nog hier wees, maar onder teentowerspreuke," sê Hermione. "Towerspreuke wat keer dat dit met toorkrag ontbied kan word, weet julle."

"Soos wat Voldemort op daardie klipkom in die grot gesit het." Harry onthou hoe hy die vals hangertjie nie kon Ontbied nie.

"Nou hoe is ons dan veronderstel om dit te kry?" vra Ron.

"Ons moet self soek," sê Hermione.

"Dis 'n goeie idee," sê Ron. Hy rol sy oë en begin dan verder by die gordyne soek.

Hulle fynkam elke stukkie van die vertrek vir meer as 'n uur, maar word uiteindelik gedwing om te aanvaar die hangertjie is nie daar nie.

Die son het nou opgekom; sy lig verblind hulle selfs deur die vuil vensters in die trapportaal.

"Dit kan iewers anders in die huis wees," praat Hermione hulle moed in terwyl hulle terug ondertoe loop: soos Harry en Ron mismoediger word, raak sy skynbaar vasberader. "Of hy dit reggekry het om dit te vernietig of nie, hy sou dit vir Voldemort wou weggesteek, dan nie? Onthou julle al daardie aaklige goed waarvan ons ontslae moes raak toe ons laas hier was? Daai staanhorlosie wat almal met strale gepeper het en daardie ou klede wat Ron wou ver-

wurg. Regulus het dit dalk daar gesit om die hangertjie se wegsteekplek te beskerm, al het ons dit nie toe . . . toe . . ."

Harry en Ron kyk na haar. Sy staan met een voet in die lug en lyk so dronkgeslaan soos iemand wie se geheue nou net uitgewis is; haar oë dryf selfs uit fokus.

". . . toe besef nie," maak sy fluisterend klaar.

"Iets fout?" vra Ron.

"Daar was 'n hangertjie."

"Wat?" sê Harry en Ron tegelyk.

"In die kas in die sitkamer. Niemand kon die hangertjie oopkry nie. En ons . . . ons . . ."

Dit voel vir Harry of 'n baksteen deur sy borskas tot in sy maag afgly. Hy onthou: hy het dit selfs hanteer toe hulle dit vir mekaar aangegee en beurtelings probeer het om dit oop te wikkel. Dit is in 'n vullissak gegooi, saam met 'n snuifdoos met Vratvelpoeier en die musiekdoos wat almal vaak gemaak het . . .

"Skepsel het hope goed by ons teruggegaps," sê Harry. Dit is die enigste kans, die enigste skraal hoop wat vir hulle oorbly, en hy gaan daaraan vasklou totdat hy gedwing word om te laat los. "Hy het 'n hele geheime voorraad goed in sy kas in die kombuis gehad. Komaan."

Hy hardloop twee trappe gelyk ondertoe en die ander twee volg donderend op sy hakke. Hulle maak soveel geraas dat hulle die portret van Sirius se ma wakker maak toe hulle deur die portaal beweeg.

"*Uitvaagsels! Modderbloede! Gespuis!*" skree sy agter hulle aan terwyl hulle na die kelderkombuis toe storm en die deur agter hulle toeklap.

Harry hardloop die lengte van die vertrek af, kom glyend by Skepsel se kasdeur tot stilstand en pluk dit oop. Daar is 'n nes van vuil ou komberse waarin die huiself eens op 'n tyd geslaap het, maar dit glinster nie meer met die snuisterye wat Skepsel gered het nie. Al wat daar is, is 'n ou eksemplaar van *Adellikes van die Aarde: 'n Towenaarstamlys*. Harry weier om sy oë te glo; hy gryp die komberse en skud dit uit. 'n Dooie muis val uit en rol pateties oor die vloer. Ron kreun en sak op 'n kombuisstoel neer; Hermione maak haar oë toe.

"Dis nog nie verby nie," sê Harry en verhef sy stem en roep: "*Skepsel!*"

Daar is 'n harde *kraak* en die huiself wat Harry so teensinnig by Sirius geërf het, verskyn uit die niet voor die koue, leë vuurherd: hy is klein, die helfte so groot soos 'n mens; sy bleek vel hang in voue

van hom af, bosse wit hare groei geil uit sy vlermuisore. Hy dra nog steeds die smerige sak waarin hulle hom die eerste keer ontmoet het en die minagtende manier waarop hy Harry aankyk, wys sy houding teenoor sy nuwe eienaar het net so min soos sy uitrusting verander.

"Meester," kwaak Skepsel in sy brulpaddastem en buig laag en prewel vir sy knieë, "u is terug in my meesteres se gewese huis saam met die bloedverraaier Weasley en die Modderbloed –"

"Ek verbied jou om enigiemand 'n 'bloedverraaier' of 'Modderbloed' te noem," grom Harry. Hy sou Skepsel met sy snoetagtige neus en bloedbelope oë as absoluut onuitstaanbaar beskou het selfs al het die elf Sirius nie aan Voldemort verklap nie.

"Ek het 'n vraag vir jou," sê Harry terwyl sy hart taamlik vinnig klop en hy na die elf toe afkyk, "en ek beveel jou om dit eerlik te antwoord. Verstaan?"

"Ja, Meester," sê Skepsel en buig weer laag. Harry sien sy lippe beweeg geluidloos, ongetwyfeld besig om die beledigings te prewel wat hy nou verbied is om te uiter.

"Twee jaar gelede," sê Harry en sy hart hamer nou teen sy ribbes, "was daar 'n groot goue hangertjie in die sitkamer hierbo. Ons het dit weggegooi. Het jy dit teruggevat?"

Daar is 'n oomblik van stilte waartydens Skepsel hom regop trek om Harry vol in die gesig te kyk. Dan sê hy: "Ja."

"Waar is dit nou?" vra Harry jubelend terwyl Ron en Hermione verheug toekyk.

Skepsel maak sy oë toe asof hy dit nie kan verdra om hulle reaksies op sy volgende woord te sien nie.

"Weg."

"Weg?" herhaal Harry terwyl al die vreugde uit hom vloei. "Wat bedoel jy, dis weg?"

Die elf sidder. Hy slinger.

"Skepsel," sê Harry driftig, "ek beveel jou –"

"Mundungus Fletcher," sê die elf skor met sy oë nog steeds styf toe. "Mundungus Fletcher het dit alles gesteel: juffrou Bella en juffrou Cissy se foto's, my meesteres se handskoene, die Orde van Merlin, Eerste Klas, die bekers met die familiewapen op, en, en –"

Skepsel snak na asem: sy hol borskas deins vinnig op en af, dan vlieg sy oë oop en hy gee 'n bloedstollende kreet.

"– en die hangertjie, meester Regulus se hangertjie. Skepsel het verbrou, Skepsel het nie sy bevele uitgevoer nie!"

Harry reageer instinktief: soos Skepsel mik vir die stookyster wat in die vuurherd staan, gooi hy homself op die elf en val hom plat.

"Ek weet – maar hoe het jy uit die Inferi se kloue ontsnap?"
Skepsel verstaan blykbaar nie.

"Meester Regulus het vir Skepsel gesê om terug te kom," herhaal hy.

"Ek weet, maar –"

"Wel, dis duidelik, is dit nie, Harry?" sê Ron. "Hy't ge-Disappareer!"

"Maar . . . jy kan nie by daardie grotsaal in en uit Appareer nie," sê Harry, "anders sou Dumbledore –"

"Elwe se towerkrag is nie soos towenaars s'n nie, is dit?" sê Ron. "Ek bedoel, hulle kan by Hogwarts in en uit Appareer en Disappareer, terwyl ons nie kan nie."

Daar is 'n stilte terwyl Harry dit verteer. Hoe kon Voldemort so 'n fout gemaak het? Maar terwyl hy nog dink, praat Hermione, en haar stem is ysig.

"Voldemort het natuurlik gedink dis benede hom om enige belangstelling in huiselwe se gebruike te toon, net soos al die suiwerbloede wat hulle soos diere behandel . . . Dit sou nooit by hom opgekom het dat hulle dalk oor towerkrag beskik wat hy nie het nie."

"Die huiself se hoogste wet is om sy meester se bevele uit te voer," sing-sing Skepsel. "Skepsel is gesê om huis toe te kom, so Skepsel het huis toe gekom . . ."

"Wel, dan het jy mos gedoen wat jy aangesê is om te doen," sê Hermione vriendelik. "Jy het glad nie jou bevele verontagsaam nie!"

Skepsel skud sy kop en wieg nog steeds so vinnig soos altyd

"So wat het gebeur toe jy terugkom?" vra Harry. "Wat het Regulus gesê toe jy vir hom vertel wat gebeur het?"

"Meester Regulus was baie bekommerd, baie bekommerd," kwaak Skepsel. "Meester Regulus het gesê Skepsel moet wegkruip en nie by die huis uitgaan nie. En toe . . . dit was 'n rukkie later . . . Meester Regulus het Skepsel een aand in sy kas kom haal, en meester Regulus was vreemd, nie soos hy gewoonlik was nie; sy verstand was versteurd, Skepsel kon dit sien . . . en toe vra hy Skepsel om hom na die grot toe te vat, die grot waarheen Skepsel saam met die Donker Heer is . . ."

En so het hulle vertrek. Harry kan dit duidelik visualiseer: die bevreesde ou elf en die maer, donker Soeker wat so baie na Sirius gelyk het . . . Skepsel het geweet hoe om die versteekte ingang na die ondergrondse grotsaal oop te maak, geweet hoe om die klein bootjie uit die water op te trek; hierdie keer was dit sy geliefde Regulus wat saam met hom geseil het na die eiland met sy kom vol gif . . .

"En toe laat hy jou die towerdrankie drink?" vra Harry met afsku.

Maar Skepsel skud sy kop en ween. Hermione se hande vlieg na haar mond; dit lyk of sy iets begryp het.

"M – meester Regulus het 'n hangertjie wat soos die Donker Heer sin gelyk het uit sy sak gehaal," sê Skepsel terwyl trane aan weerskante van sy snoetneus afstroom. "En toe sê hy vir Skepsel om dit te vat en wanneer die kom leeg is die hangertjies om te ruil . . ."

Skepsel se snikke is nou harde raspergeluide; Harry moet hard konsentreer om hom te verstaan.

"En toe beveel hy – Skepsel om te gaan – sonder hom. En hy't vir Skepsel gesê – om huis toe te gaan – en nooit vir my meesteres te vertel – wat hy gedoen het nie – maar om die eerste hangertjie – te vernietig. En toe drink hy – al die gif – en Skepsel ruil die hangertjies om – en kyk . . . hoe meester Regulus . . . onder die water ingetrek word . . . en . . ."

"O, Skepsel!" weeklaag Hermione wat nou huil. Sy val op haar knieë langs die elf neer en probeer hom vasdruk. Hy spring dadelik op en deins terug van haar, duidelik gewalg.

"Die Modderbloed het aan Skepsel geraak; hy sal dit nie toelaat nie, wat sal sy meesteres sê?"

"Ek het gesê jy noem haar nie 'n 'Modderbloed' nie!" snou Harry hom toe, maar die elf straf homself reeds: hy val op die grond neer en kap sy voorkop op die vloer.

"Stop hom – stop hom!" roep Hermione uit. "O, sien julle nou hoe siek is dit – dat hulle altyd gehoorsaam moet wees?"

"Skepsel – stop, stop!" skree Harry.

Die elf lê op die vloer, hygend en bewend. Groen slym glinster om sy snoet, 'n kneusplek verskyn alreeds op die bleek voorkop waar hy homself gekap het, sy oë is opgeswel en bloedbelope en swem in trane. Harry het nog nooit enigiets so pateties gesien nie.

"So jy het die hangertjie huis toe gebring?" sê hy meedoënloos, want hy is vasberade om die volle verhaal te hoor. "En jy het probeer om dit te vernietig?"

"Niks wat Skepsel gedoen het, het eers 'n merkie daarop gemaak nie," kerm die elf. "Skepsel het alles probeer, alles waarvan hy weet, maar niks, niks wou werk nie . . . Die buitekant was met baie sterk towerspreuke beskerm; Skepsel was seker die enigste manier om dit te vernietig was om binne-in dit te kom, maar dit wou nie oopgaan nie . . . Skepsel het homself gestraf, hy't weer probeer, hy't homself gestraf, hy't weer probeer. Skepsel het nie sy bevele uitgevoer nie, Skepsel kon die hangertjie nie vernietig nie! En sy meesteres was

waansinnig van smart, want meester Regulus het verdwyn, en Skepsel kon nie vir haar vertel wat gebeur het nie, nee, want meester Regulus het hom v – v – verbied om vir enigeen in die f – f – familie te vertel wat gebeur het in die g – grot . . ."

Skepsel begin so hard snik dat daar nie meer samehangende woorde was nie. Trane loop oor Hermione se wange terwyl sy Skepsel dophou, maar sy waag dit nie om weer aan hom te raak nie. Selfs Ron, wat beslis nie 'n bewonderaar van Skepsel is nie, lyk besorg. Harry sit terug op sy hakke en skud sy kop om dit helder te probeer kry.

"Ek verstaan nie, Skepsel," sê hy uiteindelik. "Voldemort het jou probeer doodmaak, Regulus is dood om Voldemort te probeer bykom, maar jy was nog steeds bereid om Sirius by Voldemort te verklik? Jy was bereid om na Narcissa en Bellatrix toe te gaan en deur hulle vir Voldemort inligting te gee . . ."

"Harry, Skepsel redeneer nie so nie," sê Hermione en vee haar oë met die agterkant van haar hand af. "Hy's 'n slaaf; huiselwe is gewoond aan slegte, selfs brutale behandeling; wat Voldemort aan Skepsel gedoen het, was nie so ongewoon nie. Wat beteken oorloë tussen towenaars vir 'n elf soos Skepsel? Hy's lojaal aan mense wat hom goed behandel, en mevrou Black moet dit gedoen het, en Regulus het beslis, so hy was bereid om hulle te dien en te glo wat hulle glo. Ek weet wat jy gaan sê," vervolg sy toe Harry begin protesteer, "Regulus het tot ander insigte gekom . . . maar hy het dit blykbaar nie vir Skepsel verduidelik nie, het hy? En ek dink ek weet hoekom. Skepsel en Regulus se familie was almal veiliger as hulle by die ou suiwer bloedlyn gehou het. Regulus het hulle almal probeer beskerm."

"Sirius –"

"Sirius was aaklig met Skepsel, Harry, en dit help nie om so 'n gesig te trek nie, jy weet dis waar. Skepsel was al 'n hele ruk lank alleen toe Sirius hier kom woon het en hy was waarskynlik uitgehonger vir 'n bietjie vertroeteling. Ek is seker 'juffrou Cissy' en 'juffrou Bella' was lief en dierbaar met Skepsel toe hy by hulle opgedaag het, so toe doen hy hulle 'n guns en vertel hulle alles wat hulle wou weet. Ek het nog altyd gesê towenaars sal betaal vir hoe hulle huiselwe behandel. Wel, Voldemort het . . . en Sirius ook."

Harry het nie 'n antwoord nie. Terwyl hy kyk hoe Skepsel op die vloer lê en snik, onthou hy wat Dumbledore vir hom gesê het 'n paar uur ná Sirius se dood: *Ek dink nie Sirius het Skepsel ooit beskou as 'n wese met gevoelens so diep soos mense s'n nie . . .*

"Skepsel," sê Harry ná 'n rukkie, "wanneer jy voel jy kan, e . . . sit asseblief regop."

Na 'n hele paar minute hik Skepsel homself tot stilte. Dan stoot hy hom weer op tot in 'n sittende posisie en vryf sy oë met sy kneukels soos 'n klein kindjie.

"Skepsel, ek gaan jou vra om iets te doen," sê Harry. Hy loer na Hermione vir bystand: hy wil die bevel sagkens gee, maar kan terselfdertyd nie maak asof dit nie 'n bevel is nie. Dit lyk egter of die verandering in sy stemtoon haar goedkeuring wegdra: sy glimlag bemoedigend.

"Skepsel, ek wil hê jy moet asseblief na Mundungus Fletcher gaan soek. Ons moet uitvind waar die hangertjie – waar meester Regulus se hangertjie is. Dis regtig belangrik. Ons wil die werk wat meester Regulus begin het, klaarmaak; ons wil – e – seker maak hy is nie verniet dood nie."

Skepsel laat val sy vuiste en kyk op na Harry.

"Mundungus Fletcher soek?" kwaak hy.

"En hom hierheen bring, na Grimmauldplein toe," sê Harry. "Dink jy jy kan dit vir ons doen?"

Toe Skepsel knik en op die been kom, kry Harry skielik 'n ingewing. Hy haal Hagrid se sakkie om sy nek af en haal die vals Horcrux, die plaasvervanger waarin Regulus die nota vir Voldemort gesit het, uit.

"Skepsel, ek, e, wil dit graag vir jou gee," sê hy en stop die hangertjie in die elf se hand. "Dit het aan Regulus behoort en ek is seker hy sou wou hê ek moet dit vir jou gee as 'n blykie van waardering vir wat jy –"

"Jy maak die pap te dik aan, pel," sê Ron terwyl die elf die hangertjie een kyk gee, 'n kreet van skok en ellende uiter en homself weer op die grond neergooi.

Dit neem hulle amper 'n halfuur om Skepsel te kalmeer. Hy is so oorstelp dat 'n erfstuk van die Black-familie aan hom en hom alleen oorhandig is dat hy te swak in die knieë is om ordentlik te staan. Toe hy uiteindelik waggelend 'n paar treetjies kan gee, beweeg hulle almal saam met hom na sy kas toe, kyk hoe hy die hangertjie veilig tussen sy vuil komberse indruk en verseker hom hulle sal alles gee om dit te beskerm terwyl hy weg is. Dan buig hy twee keer laag vir Harry en Ron en maak selfs 'n snaakse, krampagtige beweging in Hermione se rigting wat dalk 'n poging tot 'n eerbiedige huldebetoon kan wees voor hy met die gewone harde *kraak* Disappareer.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



THE BRIBE

If Kreacher could escape a lake full of Inferi, Harry was confident that the capture of Mundungus would take a few hours at most, and he prowled the house all morning in a state of high anticipation. However, Kreacher did not return that morning or even that afternoon. By nightfall, Harry felt discouraged and anxious, and a supper composed largely of moldy bread, upon which Hermione had tried a variety of unsuccessful Transfigurations, did nothing to help.

Kreacher did not return the following day, nor the day after that. However, two cloaked men had appeared in the square outside number twelve, and they remained there into the night, gazing in the direction of the house that they could not see.

"Death Eaters, for sure," said Ron, as he, Harry, and Hermione watched from the drawing room windows. "Reckon they know we're in here?"

"I don't think so," said Hermione, though she looked frightened, "or they'd have sent Snape in after us, wouldn't they?"

"D'you reckon he's been in here and had his tongue tied by Moody's curse?" asked Ron.

"Yes," said Hermione, "otherwise he'd have been able to tell that lot how to get in, wouldn't he? But they're probably watching to see whether we turn up. They know that Harry owns the house, after all."

"How do they — ?" began Harry.

"Wizarding wills are examined by the Ministry, remember? They'll know Sirius left you the place."

The presence of the Death Eaters outside increased the ominous mood inside number twelve. They had not heard a word from anyone beyond Grimmauld Place since Mr. Weasley's Patronus, and the strain was starting to tell. Restless and irritable, Ron had developed an annoying habit of playing with the Deluminator in his pocket: This particularly infuriated Hermione, who was whiling away the wait for Kreacher by studying *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* and did not appreciate the way the lights kept flashing on and off.

"Will you stop it!" she cried on the third evening of Kreacher's absence, as all light was sucked from the drawing room yet again.

"Sorry, sorry!" said Ron, clicking the Deluminator and restoring the lights. "I don't know I'm doing it!"

"Well, can't you find something useful to occupy yourself?"

"What, like reading kids' stories?"

"Dumbledore left me this book, Ron —"

"— and he left me the Deluminator, maybe I'm supposed to use it!"

Unable to stand the bickering, Harry slipped out of the room unnoticed by either of them. He headed downstairs toward the kitchen, which he kept visiting because he was sure that was where Kreacher was most likely to reappear. Halfway down the flight of stairs into the hall, however, he heard a tap on the front door, then metallic clicks and the grinding of the chain.

Every nerve in his body seemed to tauten: He pulled out his wand, moved into the shadows beside the decapitated elf heads, and waited. The door opened: He saw a glimpse of the lamplit square outside, and a cloaked figure edged into the hall and closed the door behind it. The intruder took a step forward, and Moody's voice asked, *"Severus Snape?"* Then the dust figure rose from the end of the hall and rushed him, raising its dead hand.

"It was not I who killed you, Albus," said a quiet voice.

The jinx broke: The dust-figure exploded again, and it was impossible to make out the newcomer through the dense gray cloud it left behind.

Harry pointed his wand into the middle of it.

"Don't move!"

He had forgotten the portrait of Mrs. Black: At the sound of his yell, the curtains hiding her flew open and she began to scream, *"Mudbloods and filth dishonoring my house —"*

Ron and Hermione came crashing down the stairs behind Harry, wands pointing, like his, at the unknown man now standing with his arms raised in the hall below.

"Hold your fire, it's me, Remus!"

"Oh, thank goodness," said Hermione weakly, pointing her wand at Mrs. Black instead; with a bang, the curtains swished shut again and silence fell. Ron too lowered his wand, but Harry did not.

"Show yourself!" he called back.

Lupin moved forward into the lamplight, hands still held high in a gesture of surrender.

"I am Remus John Lupin, werewolf, sometimes known as Moony, one of the four creators of the Marauder's Map, married to Nymphadora, usually known as Tonks, and I taught you how to produce a Patronus, Harry, which takes the form of a stag."

"Oh, all right," said Harry, lowering his wand, "but I had to check, didn't I?"

"Speaking as your ex-Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, I quite agree that you had to check. Ron, Hermione, you shouldn't be quite so quick to lower your defenses."

They ran down the stairs toward him. Wrapped in a thick black traveling cloak, he looked exhausted, but pleased to see them.

"No sign of Severus, then?" he asked.

"No," said Harry. "What's going on? Is everyone okay?"

"Yes," said Lupin, "but we're all being watched. There are a couple of Death Eaters in the square outside —"

"We know —"

"I had to Apparate very precisely onto the top step outside the front door to be sure that they would not see me. They can't know you're in here or I'm sure they'd have more people out there; they're staking out everywhere that's got any connection with you, Harry.

Let's go downstairs, there's a lot to tell you, and I want to know what happened after you left the Burrow."

They descended into the kitchen, where Hermione pointed her wand at the grate. A fire sprang up instantly: It gave the illusion of coziness to the stark stone walls and glistened off the long wooden table. Lupin pulled a few butterbeers from beneath his traveling cloak and they sat down.

"I'd have been here three days ago but I needed to shake off the Death Eater tailing me," said Lupin. "So, you came straight here after the wedding?"

"No," said Harry, "only after we ran into a couple of Death Eaters in a café on Tottenham Court Road."

Lupin slopped most of his butterbeer down his front.

"What?"

They explained what had happened; when they had finished, Lupin looked aghast.

"But how did they find you so quickly? It's impossible to track anyone who Apparates, unless you grab hold of them as they disappear!"

"And it doesn't seem likely they were just strolling down Tottenham Court Road at the time, does it?" said Harry.

"We wondered," said Hermione tentatively, "whether Harry could still have the Trace on him?"

"Impossible," said Lupin. Ron looked smug, and Harry felt hugely relieved. "Apart from anything else, they'd know for sure Harry was here if he still had the Trace on him, wouldn't they? But I can't see how they could have tracked you to Tottenham Court Road, that's

worrying, really worrying."

He looked disturbed, but as far as Harry was concerned, that question could wait.

"Tell us what happened after we left, we haven't heard a thing since Ron's dad told us the family were safe."

"Well, Kingsley saved us," said Lupin. "Thanks to his warning most of the wedding guests were able to Disapparate before they arrived."

"Were they Death Eaters or Ministry people?" interjected Hermione.

"A mixture; but to all intents and purposes they're the same thing now," said Lupin. "There were about a dozen of them, but they didn't know you were there, Harry. Arthur heard a rumor that they tried to torture your whereabouts out of Scrimgeour before they killed him; if it's true, he didn't give you away."

Harry looked at Ron and Hermione; their expressions reflected the mingled shock and gratitude he felt. He had never liked Scrimgeour much, but if what Lupin said was true, the man's final act had been to try to protect Harry.

"The Death Eaters searched the Burrow from top to bottom," Lupin went on. "They found the ghoul, but didn't want to get too close — and then they interrogated those of us who remained for hours. They were trying to get information on you, Harry, but of course nobody apart from the Order knew that you had been there.

"At the same time that they were smashing up the wedding, more Death Eaters were forcing their way into every Order-connected house in the country. No deaths," he added quickly, forestalling the

question, "but they were rough. They burned down Dedalus Diggle's house, but as you know he wasn't there, and they used the Cruciatus Curse on Tonks's family. Again, trying to find out where you went after you visited them. They're all right — shaken, obviously, but otherwise okay."

"The Death Eaters got through all those protective charms?" Harry asked, remembering how effective these had been on the night he had crashed in Tonks's parents' garden.

"What you've got to realize, Harry, is that the Death Eaters have got the full might of the Ministry on their side now," said Lupin. "They've got the power to perform brutal spells without fear of identification or arrest. They managed to penetrate every defensive spell we'd cast against them, and once inside, they were completely open about why they'd come."

"And are they bothering to give an excuse for torturing Harry's whereabouts out of people?" asked Hermione, an edge to her voice.

"Well," said Lupin. He hesitated, then pulled out a folded copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

"Here," he said, pushing it across the table to Harry, "you'll know sooner or later anyway. That's their pretext for going after you."

Harry smoothed out the paper. A huge photograph of his own face filled the front page. He read the headline over it:

WANTED FOR QUESTIONING ABOUT THE DEATH OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

Ron and Hermione gave roars of outrage, but Harry said nothing. He pushed the newspaper away; he did not want to read any more:

He knew what it would say. Nobody but those who had been on top of the tower when Dumbledore died knew who had really killed him and, as Rita Skeeter had already told the Wizarding world, Harry had been seen running from the place moments after Dumbledore had fallen.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Lupin said.

"So Death Eaters have taken over the *Daily Prophet* too?" asked Hermione furiously.

Lupin nodded.

"But surely people realize what's going on?"

"The coup has been smooth and virtually silent," said Lupin. "The official version of Scrimgeour's murder is that he resigned; he has been replaced by Pius Thicknesse, who is under the Imperius Curse."

"Why didn't Voldemort declare himself Minister of Magic?" asked Ron.

Lupin laughed.

"He doesn't need to, Ron. Effectively he *is* the Minister, but why should he sit behind a desk at the Ministry? His puppet, Thicknesse, is taking care of everyday business, leaving Voldemort free to extend his power beyond the Ministry.

"Naturally many people have deduced what has happened: There has been such a dramatic change in Ministry policy in the last few days, and many are whispering that Voldemort must be behind it. However, that is the point: They whisper. They daren't confide in each other, not knowing whom to trust; they are scared to speak out, in case their suspicions are true and their families are targeted. Yes, Voldemort is playing a very clever game. Declaring himself might

have provoked open rebellion: Remaining masked has created confusion, uncertainty, and fear."

"And this dramatic change in Ministry policy," said Harry, "involves warning the Wizarding world against me instead of Voldemort?"

"That's certainly part of it," said Lupin, "and it is a masterstroke. Now that Dumbledore is dead, you — the Boy Who Lived — were sure to be the symbol and rallying point for any resistance to Voldemort. But by suggesting that you had a hand in the old hero's death, Voldemort has not only set a price upon your head, but sown doubt and fear amongst many who would have defended you.

"Meanwhile, the Ministry has started moving against Muggle-borns."

Lupin pointed at the *Daily Prophet*.

"Look at page two."

Hermione turned the pages with much the same expression of distaste she had worn when handling *Secrets of the Darkest Art*.

"*'Muggle-born Register,'*" she read aloud. "*'The Ministry of Magic is undertaking a survey of so-called "Muggle-borns," the better to understand how they came to possess magical secrets.*

"'Recent research undertaken by the Department of Mysteries reveals that magic can only be passed from person to person when Wizards reproduce. Where no proven Wizarding ancestry exists, therefore, the so-called Muggle-born is likely to have obtained magical power by theft or force.

"'The Ministry is determined to root out such usurpers of magical power, and to this end has issued an invitation to every so-

called Muggle-born to present themselves for interview by the newly appointed Muggle-born Registration Commission.'"

"People won't let this happen," said Ron.

"It *is* happening, Ron," said Lupin. "Muggle-borns are being rounded up as we speak."

"But how are they supposed to have 'stolen' magic?" said Ron. "It's mental, if you could steal magic there wouldn't be any Squibs, would there?"

"I know," said Lupin. "Nevertheless, unless you can prove that you have at least one close Wizarding relative, you are now deemed to have obtained your magical power illegally and must suffer the punishment."

Ron glanced at Hermione, then said, "What if purebloods and half-bloods swear a Muggle-born's part of their family? I'll tell everyone Hermione's my cousin —"

Hermione covered Ron's hand with hers and squeezed it.

"Thank you, Ron, but I couldn't let you —"

"You won't have a choice," said Ron fiercely, gripping her hand back. "I'll teach you my family tree so you can answer questions on it."

Hermione gave a shaky laugh.

"Ron, as we're on the run with Harry Potter, the most wanted person in the country, I don't think it matters. If I was going back to school it would be different. What's Voldemort planning for Hogwarts?" she asked Lupin.

"Attendance is now compulsory for every young witch and wizard," he replied. "That was announced yesterday. It's a change,

because it was never obligatory before. Of course, nearly every witch and wizard in Britain has been educated at Hogwarts, but their parents had the right to teach them at home or send them abroad if they preferred. This way, Voldemort will have the whole Wizarding population under his eye from a young age. And it's also another way of weeding out Muggle-borns, because students must be given Blood Status — meaning that they have proven to the Ministry that they are of Wizard descent — before they are allowed to attend."

Harry felt sickened and angry: At this moment, excited eleven-year-olds would be poring over stacks of newly purchased spellbooks, unaware that they would never see Hogwarts, perhaps never see their families again either.

"It's . . . it's . . ." he muttered, struggling to find words that did justice to the horror of his thoughts, but Lupin said quietly,

"I know."

Lupin hesitated.

"I'll understand if you can't confirm this, Harry, but the Order is under the impression that Dumbledore left you a mission."

"He did," Harry replied, "and Ron and Hermione are in on it and they're coming with me."

"Can you confide in me what the mission is?"

Harry looked into the prematurely lined face, framed in thick but graying hair, and wished that he could return a different answer.

"I can't, Remus, I'm sorry. If Dumbledore didn't tell you I don't think I can."

"I thought you'd say that," said Lupin, looking disappointed. "But I might still be of some use to you. You know what I am and what I can

do. I could come with you to provide protection. There would be no need to tell me exactly what you were up to."

Harry hesitated. It was a very tempting offer, though how they would be able to keep their mission secret from Lupin if he were with them all the time he could not imagine.

Hermione, however, looked puzzled.

"But what about Tonks?" she asked.

"What about her?" said Lupin.

"Well," said Hermione, frowning, "you're married! How does she feel about you going away with us?"

"Tonks will be perfectly safe," said Lupin. "She'll be at her parents' house."

There was something strange in Lupin's tone; it was almost cold. There was also something odd in the idea of Tonks remaining hidden at her parents' house; she was, after all, a member of the Order and, as far as Harry knew, was likely to want to be in the thick of the action.

"Remus," said Hermione tentatively, "is everything all right . . . you know . . . between you and —"

"Everything is fine, thank you," said Lupin pointedly.

Hermione turned pink. There was another pause, an awkward and embarrassed one, and then Lupin said, with an air of forcing himself to admit something unpleasant, "Tonks is going to have a baby."

"Oh, how wonderful!" squealed Hermione.

"Excellent!" said Ron enthusiastically.

"Congratulations," said Harry.

Lupin gave an artificial smile that was more like a grimace, then said, "So . . . do you accept my offer? Will three become four? I cannot believe that Dumbledore would have disapproved, he appointed me your Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, after all. And I must tell you that I believe that we are facing magic many of us have never encountered or imagined."

Ron and Hermione both looked at Harry.

"Just — just to be clear," he said. "You want to leave Tonks at her parents' house and come away with us?"

"She'll be perfectly safe there, they'll look after her," said Lupin. He spoke with a finality bordering on indifference. "Harry, I'm sure James would have wanted me to stick with you."

"Well," said Harry slowly, "I'm not. I'm pretty sure my father would have wanted to know why you aren't sticking with your own kid, actually."

Lupin's face drained of color. The temperature in the kitchen might have dropped ten degrees. Ron stared around the room as though he had been bidden to memorize it, while Hermione's eyes swiveled backward and forward from Harry to Lupin.

"You don't understand," said Lupin at last.

"Explain, then," said Harry.

Lupin swallowed.

"I — I made a grave mistake in marrying Tonks. I did it against my better judgment and I have regretted it very much ever since."

"I see," said Harry, "so you're just going to dump her and the kid and run off with us?"

Lupin sprang to his feet: His chair toppled over backward, and he

glared at them so fiercely that Harry saw, for the first time ever, the shadow of the wolf upon his human face.

"Don't you understand what I've done to my wife and my unborn child? I should never have married her, I've made her an outcast!"

Lupin kicked aside the chair he had overturned.

"You have only ever seen me amongst the Order, or under Dumbledore's protection at Hogwarts! You don't know how most of the Wizarding world sees creatures like me! When they know of my affliction, they can barely talk to me! Don't you see what I've done? Even her own family is disgusted by our marriage, what parents want their only daughter to marry a werewolf? And the child — the child —"

Lupin actually seized handfuls of his own hair; he looked quite deranged.

"My kind don't usually breed! It will be like me, I am convinced of it — how can I forgive myself, when I knowingly risked passing on my own condition to an innocent child? And if, by some miracle, it is not like me, then it will be better off, a hundred times so, without a father of whom it must always be ashamed!"

"Remus!" whispered Hermione, tears in her eyes. "Don't say that — how could any child be ashamed of you?"

"Oh, I don't know, Hermione," said Harry. "I'd be pretty ashamed of him."

Harry did not know where his rage was coming from, but it had propelled him to his feet too. Lupin looked as though Harry had hit him.

"If the new regime thinks Muggle-borns are bad," Harry said,

"what will they do to a half-werewolf whose father's in the Order? My father died trying to protect my mother and me, and you reckon he'd tell you to abandon your kid to go on an adventure with us?"

"How — how dare you?" said Lupin. "This is not about a desire for — for danger or personal glory — how dare you suggest such a —"

"I think you're feeling a bit of a daredevil," Harry said. "You fancy stepping into Sirius's shoes —"

"Harry, no!" Hermione begged him, but he continued to glare into Lupin's livid face.

"I'd never have believed this," Harry said. "The man who taught me to fight dementors — a coward."

Lupin drew his wand so fast that Harry had barely reached for his own; there was a loud bang and he felt himself flying backward as if punched; as he slammed into the kitchen wall and slid to the floor, he glimpsed the tail of Lupin's cloak disappearing around the door.

"Remus, Remus, come back!" Hermione cried, but Lupin did not respond. A moment later they heard the front door slam.

"Harry!" wailed Hermione. "How could you?"

"It was easy," said Harry. He stood up; he could feel a lump swelling where his head had hit the wall. He was still so full of anger he was shaking.

"Don't look at me like that!" he snapped at Hermione.

"Don't you start on her!" snarled Ron.

"No — no — we mustn't fight!" said Hermione, launching herself between them.

"You shouldn't have said that stuff to Lupin," Ron told Harry.

"He had it coming to him," said Harry. Broken images were racing each other through his mind: Sirius falling through the veil; Dumbledore suspended, broken, in midair; a flash of green light and his mother's voice, begging for mercy . . .

"Parents," said Harry, "shouldn't leave their kids unless — unless they've got to."

"Harry —" said Hermione, stretching out a consoling hand, but he shrugged it off and walked away, his eyes on the fire Hermione had conjured. He had once spoken to Lupin out of that fireplace, seeking reassurance about James, and Lupin had consoled him. Now Lupin's tortured white face seemed to swim in the air before him. He felt a sickening surge of remorse. Neither Ron nor Hermione spoke, but Harry felt sure that they were looking at each other behind his back, communicating silently.

He turned around and caught them turning hurriedly away from each other.

"I know I shouldn't have called him a coward."

"No, you shouldn't," said Ron at once.

"But he's acting like one."

"All the same . . ." said Hermione.

"I know," said Harry. "But if it makes him go back to Tonks, it'll be worth it, won't it?"

He could not keep the plea out of his voice. Hermione looked sympathetic, Ron uncertain. Harry looked down at his feet, thinking of his father. Would James have backed Harry in what he had said to Lupin, or would he have been angry at how his son had treated his old friend?

The silent kitchen seemed to hum with the shock of the recent scene and with Ron and Hermione's unspoken reproaches. The *Daily Prophet* Lupin had brought was still lying on the table, Harry's own face staring up at the ceiling from the front page. He walked over to it and sat down, opened the paper at random, and pretended to read. He could not take in the words; his mind was still too full of the encounter with Lupin. He was sure that Ron and Hermione had resumed their silent communications on the other side of the *Prophet*. He turned a page loudly, and Dumbledore's name leapt out at him. It was a moment or two before he took in the meaning of the photograph, which showed a family group. Beneath the photograph were the words: *The Dumbledore family, left to right: Albus; Percival, holding newborn Ariana; Kendra; and Aberforth.*

His attention caught, Harry examined the picture more carefully. Dumbledore's father, Percival, was a good-looking man with eyes that seemed to twinkle even in this faded old photograph. The baby, Ariana, was little longer than a loaf of bread and no more distinctive-looking. The mother, Kendra, had jet-black hair pulled into a high bun. Her face had a carved quality about it. Harry thought of photos of Native Americans he'd seen as he studied her dark eyes, high cheekbones, and straight nose, formally composed above a high-necked silk gown. Albus and Aberforth wore matching lacy collared jackets and had identical, shoulder-length hairstyles. Albus looked several years older, but otherwise the two boys looked very alike, for this was before Albus's nose had been broken and before he started wearing glasses.

The family looked quite happy and normal, smiling serenely up out

of the newspaper. Baby Ariana's arm waved vaguely out of her shawl. Harry looked above the picture and saw the headline:

EXCLUSIVE EXTRACT FROM THE UPCOMING BIOGRAPHY OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

by Rita Skeeter

Thinking that it could hardly make him feel any worse than he already did, Harry began to read:

> Proud and haughty, Kendra Dumbledore could not bear to remain in Mould-on-the-Wold after her husband Percival's well-publicized arrest and imprisonment in Azkaban. She therefore decided to uproot the family and relocate to Godric's Hollow, the village that was later to gain fame as the scene of Harry Potter's strange escape from You-Know-Who.
>
> Like Mould-on-the-Wold, Godric's Hollow was home to a number of Wizarding families, but as Kendra knew none of them, she would be spared the curiosity about her husband's crime she had faced in her former village. By repeatedly rebuffing the friendly advances of her new Wizarding neighbors, she soon ensured that her family was left well alone.
>
> "Slammed the door in my face when I went around to welcome her with a batch of homemade Cauldron Cakes," says Bathilda Bagshot. "The first year they were there I only ever saw the two boys. Wouldn't have known there was a daughter if I hadn't been picking Plangentines by moonlight the winter after they moved in, and saw Kendra leading Ariana out into the back

garden. Walked her round the lawn once, keeping a firm grip on her, then took her back inside. Didn't know what to make of it."

It seems that Kendra thought the move to Godric's Hollow was the perfect opportunity to hide Ariana once and for all, something she had probably been planning for years. The timing was significant. Ariana was barely seven years old when she vanished from sight, and seven is the age by which most experts agree that magic will have revealed itself, if present. Nobody now alive remembers Ariana ever demonstrating even the slightest sign of magical ability. It seems clear, therefore, that Kendra made a decision to hide her daughter's existence rather than suffer the shame of admitting that she had produced a Squib. Moving away from the friends and neighbors who knew Ariana would, of course, make imprisoning her all the easier. The tiny number of people who henceforth knew of Ariana's existence could be counted upon to keep the secret, including her two brothers, who deflected awkward questions with the answer their mother had taught them: "My sister is too frail for school."

Next week: Albus Dumbledore at Hogwarts — the Prizes and the Pretense.

Harry had been wrong: What he had read had indeed made him feel worse. He looked back at the photograph of the apparently happy family. Was it true? How could he find out? He wanted to go to Godric's Hollow, even if Bathilda was in no fit state to talk to him; he wanted to visit the place where he and Dumbledore had both lost loved ones. He was in the process of lowering the newspaper, to ask

Ron's and Hermione's opinions, when a deafening *crack* echoed around the kitchen.

For the first time in three days Harry had forgotten all about Kreacher. His immediate thought was that Lupin had burst back into the room, and for a split second, he did not take in the mass of struggling limbs that had appeared out of thin air right beside his chair. He hurried to his feet as Kreacher disentangled himself and, bowing low to Harry, croaked, "Kreacher has returned with the thief Mundungus Fletcher, Master."

Mundungus scrambled up and pulled out his wand; Hermione, however, was too quick for him.

"Expelliarmus!"

Mundungus's wand soared into the air, and Hermione caught it. Wild-eyed, Mundungus dived for the stairs: Ron rugby-tackled him and Mundungus hit the stone floor with a muffled crunch.

"What?" he bellowed, writhing in his attempts to free himself from Ron's grip. "Wha've I done? Setting a bleedin' 'ouse-elf on me, what are you playing at, wha've I done, lemme go, lemme go, or —"

"You're not in much of a position to make threats," said Harry. He threw aside the newspaper, crossed the kitchen in a few strides, and dropped to his knees beside Mundungus, who stopped struggling and looked terrified. Ron got up, panting, and watched as Harry pointed his wand deliberately at Mundungus's nose. Mundungus stank of stale sweat and tobacco smoke: His hair was matted and his robes stained.

"Kreacher apologizes for the delay in bringing the thief, Master," croaked the elf. "Fletcher knows how to avoid capture, has many hidey-holes and accomplices. Nevertheless, Kreacher cornered the

thief in the end."

"You've done really well, Kreacher," said Harry, and the elf bowed low.

"Right, we've got a few questions for you," Harry told Mundungus, who shouted at once,

"I panicked, okay? I never wanted to come along, no offense, mate, but I never volunteered to die for you, an' that was bleedin' You-Know-Who come flying at me, anyone woulda got outta there, I said all along I didn't wanna do it —"

"For your information, none of the rest of us Disapparated," said Hermione.

"Well, you're a bunch of bleedin' 'eroes then, aren't you, but I never pretended I was up for killing meself —"

"We're not interested in why you ran out on Mad-Eye," said Harry, moving his wand a little closer to Mundungus's baggy, bloodshot eyes. "We already knew you were an unreliable bit of scum."

"Well then, why the 'ell am I being 'unted down by 'ouse-elves? Or is this about them goblets again? I ain't got none of 'em left, or you could 'ave 'em —"

"It's not about the goblets either, although you're getting warmer," said Harry. "Shut up and listen."

It felt wonderful to have something to do, someone of whom he could demand some small portion of truth. Harry's wand was now so close to the bridge of Mundungus's nose that Mundungus had gone cross-eyed trying to keep it in view.

"When you cleaned out this house of anything valuable," Harry began, but Mundungus interrupted him again.

"Sirius never cared about any of the junk —"

There was the sound of pattering feet, a blaze of shining copper, an echoing clang, and a shriek of agony: Kreacher had taken a run at Mundungus and hit him over the head with a saucepan.

"Call 'im off, call 'im off, 'e should be locked up!" screamed Mundungus, cowering as Kreacher raised the heavy-bottomed pan again.

"Kreacher, no!" shouted Harry.

Kreacher's thin arms trembled with the weight of the pan, still held aloft.

"Perhaps just one more, Master Harry, for luck?"

Ron laughed.

"We need him conscious, Kreacher, but if he needs persuading you can do the honors," said Harry.

"Thank you very much, Master," said Kreacher with a bow, and he retreated a short distance, his great pale eyes still fixed upon Mundungus with loathing.

"When you stripped this house of all the valuables you could find," Harry began again, "you took a bunch of stuff from the kitchen cupboard. There was a locket there." Harry's mouth was suddenly dry: He could sense Ron and Hermione's tension and excitement too. "What did you do with it?"

"Why?" asked Mundungus. "Is it valuable?"

"You've still got it!" cried Hermione.

"No, he hasn't," said Ron shrewdly. "He's wondering whether he should have asked more money for it."

"More?" said Mundungus. "That wouldn't have been effing

difficult . . . bleedin' gave it away, di'n' I? No choice."

"What do you mean?"

"I was selling in Diagon Alley and she come up to me and asks if I've got a license for trading in magical artifacts. Bleedin' snoop. She was gonna fine me, but she took a fancy to the locket an' told me she'd take it and let me off that time, and to fink meself lucky."

"Who was this woman?" asked Harry.

"I dunno, some Ministry hag."

Mundungus considered for a moment, brow wrinkled.

"Little woman. Bow on top of 'er head."

He frowned and then added, "Looked like a toad."

Harry dropped his wand: It hit Mundungus on the nose and shot red sparks into his eyebrows, which ignited.

"Aguamenti!" screamed Hermione, and a jet of water streamed from her wand, engulfing a spluttering and choking Mundungus.

Harry looked up and saw his own shock reflected in Ron's and Hermione's faces. The scars on the back of his right hand seemed to be tingling again.

— HOOFSTUK ELF —

Die Omkopery

As Skepsel uit die meer vol Inferi kon ontsnap, is Harry seker dit sal op die meeste 'n paar uur neem om Mundungus te vang, en hy loop die hele oggend hoogs afwagtend heen en weer in die huis. Skepsel kom egter nie daardie oggend terug nie, en ook nie die middag nie. Teen sononder is Harry moedeloos en bekommerd, en die aandete, wat hoofsaaklik bestaan uit skimmelbrood waarop Hermione 'n verskeidenheid onsuksesvolle Transformasies probeer uitvoer het, help glad nie.

Skepsel kom nie die volgende dag terug nie, en ook nie die dag daarna nie. Daar verskyn egter twee mans in mantels op die plein buitekant nommer twaalf; hulle bly tot die nag daar en staar in die rigting van die huis wat hulle nie kan sien nie.

"Dis definitief Doodseters," sê Ron terwyl hy, Harry en Hermione hulle deur die sitkamer se vensters dophou. "Dink julle hulle weet ons is hier?"

"Ek glo nie," sê Hermione, hoewel sy bang lyk, "anders sou hulle mos vir Snape agter ons aan gestuur het, of hoe?"

"Dink jy hy was hierbinne en het hom in Moody se Tongknoopvloek vasgeloop?" vra Ron.

"Ja," sê Hermione, "anders sou hy mos vir daai spul kon sê hoe om hier in te kom. Maar hulle staan seker wag om te sien of ons opdaag. Hulle weet mos die huis behoort aan Harry."

"Hoe weet hulle –?" begin Harry.

"Die Ministerie kontroleer towenaars se testamente, onthou. Hulle sal weet Sirius het die plek aan jou bemaak."

Die Doodseters se teenwoordigheid buite vererger die onheilspellende atmosfeer in nommer twaalf. Hulle het sedert meneer Weasley se Patronus nog nie 'n woord van enigiemand buitekant Grimmauldplein gehoor nie en die spanning begin nou sy tol eis. Ron het uit rusteloosheid en irritasie die lastige gewoonte ontwikkel om met die Afskakelaar in sy sak te speel: dit maak Hermione rasend, want terwyl hulle vir Skepsel wag, verwyl sy die tyd deur *Die Verhale van*

Beedle die Skrywer te lees en sy hou nie daarvan dat die ligte aanhoudend aan- en afgaan nie.

"Hou nou op daarmee!" roep sy op die derde aand van Skepsel se afwesigheid uit toe al die ligte in die sitkamer weer eens uitgedoof word.

"Jammer, jammer!" sê Ron en klik die Afskakelaar om die ligte weer terug te bring. "Ek weet nie ek doen dit nie!"

"Wel, kan jy nie iets nuttigs kry om jou mee besig te hou nie?"

"Wat, soos om kinderstories te lees?"

"Dumbledore het hierdie boek aan my bemaak, Ron –"

"– en hy't die Afskakelaar aan my bemaak, so miskien is ek veronderstel om dit te gebruik!"

Harry is nie lus vir die gekibbel nie en glip ongesiens by die vertrek uit. Hy kry koers onder na die kombuis toe waarheen hy aanhoudend gaan, want hy is seker dit is waar Skepsel heel waarskynlik weer sal verskyn. Maar halfpad met die trap af ingangsportaal toe hoor hy 'n ligte klop aan die voordeur en dan klikkende metaalgeluide en die ketting wat kletter.

Elke senuwee in sy lyf span styf: hy pluk sy towerstaf uit, beweeg tot in die skaduwees langs die onthoofde elfkoppe en wag. Die deur gaan oop: hy sien die lampverligte plein buite skrams, en 'n figuur in 'n mantel kom vinnig by die voorportaal in en maak die deur agter hom toe. Die indringer gee 'n tree vorentoe en Maloog se stem vra: *"Severus Snape?"* Dan verrys die stoffiguur aan die onderpunt van die portaal en pyl op hom af met sy dooie hand in die lug.

"Dis nie ek wat jou vermoor het nie, Albus," sê 'n stil stem.

Die paljas word verbreek: die stoffiguur ontplof weer en dit is onmoontlik om deur die digte grys wolk wat dit agterlaat, uit te maak wie die nuwe aankomeling is.

Harry rig sy towerstaf op die middel van die wolk.

"Moenie beweeg nie!

Hy het van mevrou Black se portret vergeet: toe sy sy stem hoor, vlieg die gordyne wat haar verberg oop en sy begin skree: "*Modderbloede en uitvaagsels wat my huis onteer –*"

Ron en Hermione storm by die trap agter Harry af met hulle towerstawwe ook gerig op die onbekende man wat nou met sy arms in die lug onder in die portaal staan.

"Wag; dis ek, Remus!"

"O, dankie tog," sê Hermione flou en wys dan met haar towerstaf na mevrou Black; die gordyne vlieg met 'n knal weer toe en dit is stil. Ron laat sak ook sy towerstaf, maar nie Harry nie.

"Kom vorentoe!" roep hy terug.

Lupin beweeg vorentoe tot in die lamplig, sy hande nog steeds gelig in 'n gebaar van oorgawe.

"Ek is Remus John Lupin, weerwolf, soms bekend as Maantjie, een van die vier skeppers van die Plunderaar se Kaart, getroud met Nymphadora, gewoonlik bekend as Tonks, en ek het vir jou wat Harry is, geleer om 'n Patronus wat die vorm van 'n takbok aanneem, op te tower."

"O, oukei," sê Harry en laat sak sy towerstaf, "maar ek moes seker maak, of hoe?"

"In my hoedanigheid as jou gewese Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-onderwyser stem ek heeltemal saam dat jy eers moes seker maak, Harry. Ron, Hermione, julle moenie julle wapens heeltemal so gou laat sak nie."

Hulle hardloop by die trap af na hom toe. Hy is in 'n dik swart reismantel toegewikkel en lyk pootuit, maar bly om hulle te sien.

"Nog geen teken van Severus nie?" vra hy.

"Nee," sê Harry. "Wat gaan aan? Is almal oukei?"

"Ja," sê Lupin, "maar ons word almal dopgehou. Daar is twee Doodseters buite op die plein –"

"– ons weet –"

"– ek moes presies op die boonste trap buite die voordeur Appareer om seker te maak hulle sien my nie. Hulle weet nie julle is hierbinne nie, anders is ek seker daar sou meer mense buite gewees het; hulle hou al die plekke wat enige verbintenis met jou het, dop, Harry. Kom ons gaan ondertoe; ek het baie om julle te vertel en ek wil weet wat gebeur het nadat julle by Die Konynenes weg is."

Hulle gaan af kombuis toe waar Hermione met haar towerstaf na die vuurherd wys. Daar skiet dadelik vlamme op: dit gee die strak klipmure 'n illusie van geselligheid en weerkaats blink in die lang houttafel. Lupin haal 'n paar Botterbiere onder sy reismantel uit en hulle gaan sit.

"Ek sou drie dae gelede hier gewees het, maar ek moes die Doodseter wat my agtervolg het eers afskud," sê Lupin. "So julle't reguit van die troue af hiernatoe gekom?"

"Nee," sê Harry, "eers ná ons twee Doodseters in 'n kafee in Tottenham Court-weg raakgeloop het."

Lupin stort die meeste van sy Botterbier op sy bors uit.

"*Wat?*"

Hulle verduidelik wat gebeur het en toe hulle klaar is, lyk Lupin ontsteld.

"Maar hoe het hulle julle so vinnig gekry? Dis onmoontlik om

iemand wat Appareer op te spoor, tensy jy die persoon gryp en aan hom vashou terwyl hy verdwyn!"

"En dit lyk onwaarskynlik dat hulle toevallig in Tottenham Court weg afgestap het, of hoe?" sê Harry.

"Ons het gewonder," sê Hermione versigtig, "of die Spoor dalk nog op Harry is?"

"Onmoontlik," sê Lupin. Ron lyk selfvoldaan en Harry is geweldig verlig. "Afgesien van enigiets anders, sou hulle vir seker geweet het Harry is hier as die Spoor nog op hom was, dink julle nie? Maar ek kan nie sien hoe hulle julle in Tottenham Court-weg kon opspoor nie. Dis kommerwekkend, uiters kommerwekkend."

Hy lyk besorg, maar sover dit Harry aangaan, kan daardie vraag wag.

"Vertel ons wat gebeur het ná ons weg is; ons het nog niks gehoor vandat Ron se pa vir ons gesê het die familie is veilig nie."

"Wel, Kingsley het ons gered," sê Lupin. "Danksy sy waarskuwing kon die meeste van die bruilofsgaste Disappareer voor hulle daar aangekom het."

"Was hulle Doodseters en die Ministerie se mense?" wil Hermione weet.

" 'n Mengsel, maar vir alle praktiese doeleindes is hulle nou een en dieselfde ding," sê Lupin. "Daar was omtrent 'n dosyn van hulle, maar hulle't nie geweet jy was daar nie, Harry. Arthur het 'n gerug gehoor dat hulle Scrimgeour gemartel het om by hom uit te vind waar jy is voor hulle hom vermoor het; as dit waar is, het hy jou nie verraai nie."

Harry kyk na Ron en Hermione; hulle uitdrukkings weerspieël die gemengde gevoel van skok en dankbaarheid wat hy ervaar. Hy het nooit juis van Scrimgeour gehou nie, maar as dit wat Lupin sê waar is, was die man se laaste daad 'n poging om Harry te beskerm.

"Die Doodseters het Die Konynenes van hoek tot kant deursoek," gaan Lupin verder. "Hulle het die huismonster gekry, maar wou dit nie te na aan hom waag nie – en toe het hulle dié van ons wat agtergebly het ure lank ondervra. Hulle het inligting oor jou probeer kry, Harry, maar niemand behalwe die Orde het natuurlik geweet jy was daar nie.

"Op dieselfde tyd as wat hulle die troue ontwrig het, het ander Doodseters met geweld toegang verkry tot elke Orde-verwante huis in die land. Geen sterfgevalle nie," loop hy die vraag vinnig vooruit, "maar hulle het wild te kere gegaan. Hulle het Dedalus Diggle se huis afgebrand, maar soos julle weet, was hy nie daar nie, en hulle

het die Cruciatusvloek op Tonks se familie gebruik. Weer eens om te probeer uitvind waarheen jy is nadat jy by hulle was. Hulle is oukei – natuurlik geskok, maar andersins ongedeerd."

"Het die Doodseters deur al daardie beskermende paljasse gekom?" vra Harry, wat nog onthou hoe doeltreffend dit was die aand toe hy in Tonks se ouers se tuin neergestort het.

"Jy moet een ding besef, Harry: die Doodseters het nou die Ministerie se volle magtiging aan hulle kant," sê Lupin. "Hulle het die mag om brutale towerspreuke te gebruik sonder om bang te wees hulle word geïdentifiseer of gearresteer. Hulle het daarin geslaag om deur elke beskermende paljas wat ons teen hulle opgestel het, te dring en toe hulle eers binne was, het hulle nie doekies omgedraai oor hoekom hulle daar was nie."

"En verwerdig hulle hulle om te verduidelik hoekom mense gemartel word om uit te vind waar Harry is?" vra Hermione met 'n skerpte in haar stem.

"Wel," sê Lupin. Hy aarsel en haal dan 'n opgevoude eksemplaar van die *Daaglikse Profeet* uit.

"Hier," sê hy en stoot dit oor die tafel na Harry toe, "jy sal in elk geval vroeër of later uitvind. Dis die voorwendsel waaronder hulle agter jou aan is."

Harry stryk die koerant glad. Daar is 'n yslike foto van sy gesig op die voorblad. Hy lees die opskrif bokant dit:

GESOEK VIR ONDERVRAGING OOR DIE DOOD VAN ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

Ron en Hermione gee ontstoke uitroepe, maar Harry sê niks nie. Hy stoot die koerant weg; hy wil niks meer lees nie; hy weet sommer wat daar staan. Niemand behalwe die mense wat bo-op die toring was toe Dumbledore dood is, weet wie hom regtig doodgemaak het nie en, soos Rita Skeeter die towerwêreld al klaar ingelig het, het ooggetuies Harry oomblikke nadat Dumbledore geval het daarvandaan sien weghardloop.

"Ek is jammer, Harry," sê Lupin.

"So Doodseters het die *Daaglikse Profeet* ook oorgeneem?" vra Hermione woedend.

Lupin knik.

"Maar mense besef tog seker wat aangaan?"

"Die oorname was glad en feitlik stil," sê Lupin. "Die amptelike weergawe van Scrimgeour se moord is dat hy bedank het; hy is vervang deur Pius Thicknesse wat onder die Imperiusvloek is."

"Hoekom het Voldemort homself nie tot Minister van Towerkuns verklaar nie?" vra Ron.

Lupin lag.

"Hy hoef nie, Ron. Hy *is* prakties die Minister, maar hoekom sal hy by die Ministerie agter 'n lessenaar sit? Sy strooipop, Thicknesse, behartig die alledaagse sake, wat Voldemort die vryheid gee om sy mag buite die Ministerie uit te brei.

"Baie mense het natuurlik afgelei wat gebeur het: die Ministerie se beleid het die afgelope paar dae dramaties verander en baie mense fluister dat Voldemort daaragter moet sit. Dit is egter die punt: hulle fluister. Hulle kan dit nie waag om enigiemand in hul vertroue te neem nie, want hulle weet nie wie om te vertrou nie; mense is bang om te sê wat hulle dink, ingeval hulle vermoedens waar is en hulle familie dit dan moet ontgeld. Ja, Voldemort speel 'n baie slim speletjie. As hy homself openbaar het, kon hy dalk openlike rebellie ontketen het; deur gemasker te bly, boesem hy verwarring, onsekerheid en vrees in."

"En hierdie dramatiese verandering in die Ministerie se beleid," sê Harry "beteken hulle waarsku die towerwêreld nou teen my in plaas van teen Voldemort?"

"Dit is beslis deel van die plan," sê Lupin, "en dit is 'n briljante strategie. Noudat Dumbledore dood is, sou jy – die Seun Wat Bly Leef Het – vir seker die simbool en vertrekpunt vir enige weerstand teen Voldemort gewees het. Maar deur te maak asof jy deel aan die ou held se dood gehad het, het Voldemort nie net 'n prys op jou kop geplaas nie, maar twyfel en vrees gesaai onder baie wat jou sou verdedig het.

"En intussen het die Ministerie teen Moggelgeborenes begin optree."

Lupin wys na die *Daaglikse Profeet.*

"Kyk op bladsy twee."

Hermione blaai die bladsye om met dieselfde uitdrukking van afkeer as toe sy *Geheime van die Donkerste Kuns* gehanteer het.

"*'Moggelgebore Register'*," lees sy hardop. "*'Die Ministerie van Towerkuns loods 'n opname van sogenaamde "Moggelgeborenes" ten einde beter te kan verstaan hoe diegene in besit van towergeheime gekom het.*

"*'Onlangse navorsing onderneem deur die Departement van Geheime bring aan die lig dat towerkuns slegs van een persoon na 'n ander oorgedra kan word wanneer towenaars kinders in die wêreld bring. Waar daar geen bewese towerafkoms bestaan nie, is dit dus moontlik dat die sogenaamde Moggelgeborene die towerkrag met behulp van diefstal of geweld verkry het.*

"'Die Ministerie is vasberade om sulke wederregtelike besitnemers van towerkrag uit te roei, en met dié doel is 'n uitnodiging gerig aan elke sogenaamde Moggelgeborene om vir 'n onderhoud aan te meld by die pas aangestelde Moggelgebore Registrasiekommissie.'"

"Mense sal nie toelaat dat dit gebeur nie," sê Ron.

"Dit gebeur alreeds, Ron," sê Lupin. "Moggelgeborenes word terwyl ons hier praat, aangekeer."

"Maar hoe is hulle veronderstel om towerkrag te 'gesteel' het?" vra Ron. "Dis malligheid; as 'n mens towerkrag kan steel, sal daar mos nie enige Misoeste wees nie, sal daar?"

"Ek weet," sê Lupin. "Nogtans, tensy jy kan bewys jy het ten minste een towernaasbestaande, word daar nou gereken jy het jou towerkrag onwettig bekom en moet die gevolge daarvan dra."

Ron loer na Hermione en sê dan: "Wat as suiwerbloede en halfbloede sweer 'n Moggelgeborene is deel van hulle familie? Ek sal vir almal sê Hermione is my niggie –"

Hermione sit haar hand op Ron s'n en druk dit.

"Dankie, Ron, maar ek kan nie dat jy –"

"Jy gaan nie 'n keuse hê nie," sê Ron vurig en druk nou háár hand. "Ek sal vir jou ons familie se stamboom leer sodat jy vrae daaroor kan beantwoord."

Hermione gee 'n bewerige laggie.

"Ron, ons is op vlug saam met Harry Potter, die mees gesoekte persoon in die land, so ek dink nie dit maak saak nie. As ek terug skool toe gegaan het, sou dit anders gewees het. Wat beplan Voldemort vir Hogwarts?" vra sy en kyk na Lupin.

"Bywoning is nou verpligtend vir elke jong heks en towenaar," antwoord hy. "Dit is gister aangekondig. Dit is 'n nuwe verwikkeling, want dit was nooit voorheen verpligtend nie. Bykans elke heks en towenaar in Brittanje het natuurlik by Hogwarts skoolgegaan, maar hulle ouers het die reg gehad om hulle tuis te onderrig of oorsee te stuur as hulle dit sou verkies. Op dié manier sal Voldemort die hele towerbevolking van 'n vroeë ouderdom onder sy waaksame oog hê. En dis ook nog 'n manier om van Moggelgeborenes ontslae te raak, want studente moet Bloedstatus verkry – wat beteken hulle het aan die Ministerie bewys hulle is van towerafkoms – voor hulle toegelaat word om die skool by te woon."

Harry voel mislik en kwaad: op hierdie oomblik bestudeer opgewonde elfjariges stapels nuutgekoopte towerspreukboeke, min wetende dat hulle Hogwarts nooit sal sien nie, en miskien ook nie weer hulle families nie.

"Dis . . . dis . . ." mompel hy en sukkel om woorde te kry wat

reg laat geskied aan die afgryse van sy gedagtes, maar Lupin sê sag: "Ek weet."

Lupin aarsel.

"Ek sal verstaan as jy dit nie kan bevestig nie, Harry, maar die Orde is onder die indruk dat Dumbledore vir jou 'n sending nagelaat het."

"Hy het," antwoord Harry, "en Ron en Hermione weet wat dit is en hulle kom saam met my."

"Kan jy my in jou vertroue neem en sê wat die sending is?"

Harry kyk na die gesig wat so vroeg al so vol plooie is, geraam deur dik hare wat al grys word, en wens hy kan 'n ander antwoord gee.

"Ek kan nie, Remus, ek's jammer. As Dumbledore nie vir jou gesê het nie, dink ek nie ek kan nie."

"Ek het gedog jy sal so sê," sê Lupin en lyk teleurgesteld. "Maar ek kan nogtans vir jou van nut wees. Jy weet wie ek is en wat ek kan doen. Ek kan saam met julle gaan om julle te beskerm. Dit sal nie nodig wees om vir my te sê wat presies julle in die mou voer nie."

Harry huiwer. Dit is 'n baie aanloklike aanbod, hoewel hy nie kan dink hoe hulle hulle sending vir Lupin geheim sal kan hou as hy die hele tyd by hulle is nie.

Hermione lyk egter verward.

"Maar wat van Tonks?" vra sy.

"Wat van haar?" sê Lupin.

"Wel," sê Hermione fronsend, "julle is getroud! Hoe voel sy daaroor dat jy saam met ons wil weggaan?"

"Tonks sal heeltemal veilig wees," sê Lupin. "Sy sal by haar ouers se huis bly."

Daar is iets vreemds in Lupin se stemtoon; dit is amper koud. Daar is ook iets eienaardigs aan die idee dat Tonks by haar ouers se huis wegkruip; sy is per slot van rekening 'n lid van die Orde en soos Harry haar ken, sal sy waarskynlik verkies om deel van al die aksie te wees.

"Remus," sê Hermione versigtig, " is alles oukei . . . jy weet . . . tussen jou en –"

"Alles is doodreg, dankie," sê Lupin nadruklik.

Hermione word pienk. Daar is nog 'n pouse, 'n ongemaklike en verleë een, en dan sê Lupin met die houding van iemand wat homself dwing om iets onaangenaams te erken: "Tonks gaan 'n baba hê."

"O, dis wonderlik!" roep Hermione uit.

"Uitstekend!" sê Ron entoesiasties.

"Geluk," sê Harry.

Lupin gee 'n aangeplakte glimlag wat meer soos 'n gryns lyk en sê dan: "So . . . neem julle my aanbod aan? Gaan drie nou vier word? Ek kan nie dink dat Dumbledore enige besware sou hê nie; hy het my op stuk van sake as julle Verdediging Teen die Donker Kunste-onderwyser aangestel. En ek moet vir julle sê, ek dink ons gaan te doen kry met towerkrag wat baie van ons nog nie ervaar of van gedroom het nie."

Ron en Hermione kyk albei na Harry.

"Net – net om seker te maak," sê hy. "Jy wil Tonks by haar ouers se huis los en saam met ons kom?"

"Sy sal heeltemal veilig daar wees. Hulle sal na haar kyk," sê Lupin. Hy praat met 'n finaliteit wat grens aan onverskilligheid. "Harry, ek is seker James sou nie wou hê ek moet jou nie in die steek laat nie."

"Wel," sê Harry stadig, "ek is nie. Ek is doodseker my pa sou wou weet hoekom jy jou eie kind in die steek laat."

Al die kleur verdwyn uit Lupin se gesig. Dit voel of die temperatuur in die kombuis omtrent tien grade val. Ron kyk in die vertrek rond asof hy aangesê is om dit te memoriseer, terwyl Hermione se oë heen en weer tussen Harry en Lupin beweeg.

"Jy verstaan nie," sê Lupin uiteindelik.

"Nou verduidelik dan," sê Harry.

Lupin sluk.

"Ek – ek het 'n ernstige fout gemaak deur met Tonks te trou. Ek het dit teen my beterwete gedoen en ek het dit sedertdien baie diep berou."

"Ek sien," sê Harry, "so jy gaan haar en die kind nou net los en saam met ons padgee?"

Lupin spring op sy voete: sy stoel val agteroor en hy gluur so intens na hulle dat Harry vir die eerste keer ooit die skaduwee van 'n wolf op sy menslike gesig sien.

"Verstaan jy nie wat ek aan my vrou en ongebore kind gedoen het nie? Ek moes nooit met haar getrou het nie; ek het haar 'n uitgeworpene gemaak!"

Lupin skop die stoel wat hy laat omval het weg.

"Julle het my nog altyd net as een van die Orde gesien, of onder Dumbledore se beskerming by Hogwarts! Julle weet nie wat dink die grootste deel van die towergemeenskap van dierasies soos ek nie! As hulle van my toestand weet, kan hulle skaars met my praat! Sien julle nie wat ek gedoen het nie? Selfs haar eie familie is gewalg met ons huwelik; watter ouers wil hê hulle enigste dogter moet met 'n weerwolf trou? En die kind – die kind –"

Lupin gryp letterlik hande vol van sy eie hare; hy lyk totaal van sy sinne beroof.

"My soort kry nie gewoonlik kinders nie! Die kind sal soos ek wees, ek is seker daarvan – hoe kan ek myself vergewe dat ek willens en wetens die kans gewaag het om my toestand aan 'n onskuldige kind oor te dra? En as daar 'n wonderwerk gebeur en die kind is nie soos ek nie, dan sal dit 'n honderd keer beter wees om groot te word sonder 'n pa vir wie jy jou altyd moet skaam!"

"Remus!" fluister Hermione met trane in haar oë. "Moenie so sê nie – hoe kan 'n kind ooit vir jou skaam wees?"

"O, ek weet nie, Hermione," sê Harry. "Ek sal my nogal vir hom skaam."

Harry weet nie waar sy woede vandaan kom nie, maar dit laat hom nou ook opspring. Lupin lyk asof Harry hom geklap het.

"As die nuwe regime dink Moggelgeborenes is erg," sê Harry, "wat sal hulle doen met 'n halfweerwolf wie se pa 'n lid van die Orde is? My pa is dood terwyl hy my en my ma probeer beskerm het en jy dink hy sal vir jou sê om jou kind weg te gooi om saam met ons op 'n avontuur te gaan?"

"Hoe – hoe durf jy?" sê Lupin. "Dit gaan nie vir my oor 'n behoefte aan – aan gevaar of persoonlike roem nie – hoe durf jy so iets insinueer?"

"Ek dink jy sien jouself as bietjie van 'n waaghals," sê Harry. "Jy wil in Sirius se voetspore volg –"

"Harry, nee!" smeek Hermione, maar hy hou aan gluur na Lupin se gesig wat doodsbleek van woede is.

"Ek sou dit nooit geglo het nie," sê Harry. "Die man wat my geleer het hoe om teen Dementors te baklei – 'n lafaard."

Lupin pluk sy towerstaf so vinnig uit dat Harry skaars sy hand na syne kan uitsteek; daar is 'n harde slag en hy voel hoe hy agtertoe vlieg asof 'n vuishou hom getref het; terwyl hy teen die kombuismuur gesmyt word en af vloer toe gly, sien hy die punt van Lupin se mantel by die deur uit verdwyn.

"Remus, Remus, kom terug!" roep Hermione, maar Lupin antwoord nie. 'n Oomblik later hoor hulle die voordeur toeklap.

"Harry!" weeklaag Hermione. "Hoe kon jy?"

"Dit was maklik," sê Harry. Hy staan op; hy voel 'n knop opswel waar sy kop die muur getref het. Hy is nog steeds so vol woede dat hy bewe.

"Moenie so na my kyk nie!" snou hy Hermione toe.

"Moenie jy met haar ook begin nie!" grom Ron.

"Nee – nee – ons moenie baklei nie!" sê Hermione en spring tussen hulle in.

"Jy moes nie daai goed vir Lupin gesê het nie," sê Ron vir Harry.

"Hy soek lankal daarvoor," sê Harry. Gebroke beelde jaag mekaar deur sy gedagtes: Sirius wat deur die Sluier val; Dumbledore wat tussen hemel en aarde hang, gebreek; 'n flitsende groen lig en sy ma se stem wat om genade smeek . . .

"Ouers," sê Harry, "mag hulle kinders nie in die steek laat nie, tensy – tensy hulle moet."

"Harry –" sê Hermione en sit haar hand vertroostend op hom, maar hy skud dit af en loop weg, sy oë op die vuur wat Hermione opgetower het. Hy het eenkeer uit daardie vuurherd met Lupin gepraat toe hy gerusstelling oor James gesoek het en Lupin het hom getroos. Nou swem Lupin se gepynigde wit gesig in die lug voor hom. Hy kry 'n opwelling van berou wat hom naar laat voel. Nóg Ron nóg Hermione praat, maar Harry is seker hulle kyk agter sy rug na mekaar en kommunikeer stilletjies.

Hy swaai om en sien hoe hulle vinnig van mekaar af wegdraai.

"Ek weet ek moes hom nie 'n lafaard genoem het nie."

"Nee, jy moes nie," sê Ron dadelik.

"Maar hy gedra hom soos een."

"Nogtans . . ." sê Hermione.

"Ek weet," sê Harry. "Maar as dit hom terug na Tonks toe laat gaan, sal dit die moeite werd wees, of hoe?"

Hy kan nie die pleitende toon uit sy stem hou nie. Hermione lyk simpatiek, Ron onseker. Harry kyk af na sy voete en dink aan sy pa. Sou James Harry ondersteun het in wat hy vir Lupin gesê het, of sou hy kwaad gewees het oor hoe sy seun sy ou vriend behandel het?

Dit is asof die stil kombuis gons van skok oor die toneel van so pas en van Ron en Hermione se onuitgesproke verwyte. Die *Daaglikse Profeet* wat Lupin gebring het, lê nog op die tafel met Harry se gesig wat uit die voorblad na die plafon opstaar. Hy loop soontoe en gaan sit, maak die koerant na willekeur oop en maak of hy lees. Hy neem nie die woorde in nie; sy gedagtes is te vol van die onderonsie met Lupin. Hy is seker Ron en Hermione kommunikeer weer stilletjies aan die ander kant van die *Profeet*. Hy blaai hard om en Dumbledore se naam spring uit na hom. Dit duur 'n oomblik of twee voor hy die betekenis snap van die foto wat 'n familiegroep wys. Onder die foto is die woorde: *Die Dumbledore-gesin: van links na regs, Albus, Percival met die pas gebore Ariana in sy arms, Kendra en Aberforth.*

Harry se belangstelling is geprikkel en hy bestudeer die foto deegliker. Dumbledore se pa, Percival, is 'n aantreklike man wie se

oë selfs op hierdie verbleikte foto lyk of hulle vonkel. Die baba, Ariana, is skaars langer as 'n brood en niks meer besonders nie. Die ma, Kendra, het gitswart hare wat in 'n hoë bolla teruggekam is. Haar gesig lyk gesnede. Al dra sy 'n syaandrok met 'n hoë kraag, dink Harry aan Amerikaanse Indiane terwyl hy haar donker oë, hoë wangbene en reguit neus bestudeer. Albus en Aberforth dra enerse baadjies met kantkrae en het identiese, skouerlengte haarstyle. Albus lyk 'n hele paar jaar ouer, maar andersins lyk die twee seuns baie eenders, want dit is voor Albus se neus gebreek is en voor hy begin bril dra het.

Die gesin lyk heel gelukkig en normaal en glimlag kalm uit die koerant. Klein Ariana se arm waai so effens uit haar tjalie. Harry kyk bokant die foto en sien die opskrif:

EKSKLUSIEWE UITTREKSEL UIT DIE KOMENDE BIOGRAFIE VAN ALBUS DUMBLEDORE deur Rita Skeeter

Harry besluit dit kan hom beswaarlik erger laat voel as wat hy alreeds voel en begin lees:

Kendra Dumbledore was trots en hooghartig en kon dit nie verduur om in Mould-on-the-Wold aan te bly ná al die publisiteit oor haar man, Percival, se arrestasie en vonnis tot tronkstraf in Azkaban nie. Sy het dus besluit om die gesin te ontwortel en hulle te gaan hervestig in Godric's Hollow, die dorpie wat later beroemdheid sou verwerf as die plek waar Harry Potter op eienaardige wyse van Jy-Weet-Wie ontsnap het.

Net soos in Mould-on-the-Wold was daar 'n hele paar towerfamilies in Godric's Hollow woonagtig, maar aangesien Kendra nie een van hulle geken het nie, sou sy die nuuskierigheid oor haar man se misdaad wat sy in haar vorige dorp moes verduur, gespaar wees. Deur haar nuwe towerbure se vriendelike pogings tot toenadering herhaaldelik van die hand te wys, het sy spoedig verseker dat haar gesin heeltemal uitgelos word.

"Sy't die deur in my gesig toegeklap toe ek haar gaan verwelkom het met 'n baksel tuisgemaakte hekseketelkoekies," sê Bathilda Bagshot. "Die eerste jaar wat hulle hier gebly het, het ek altyd net die twee seuns gesien. Sou nooit geweet het daar's 'n dogter as ek nie die winter ná hulle ingetrek het in die maanlig klokblomme gaan pluk het en gesien het hoe Kendra vir Ariana na die agtertuin toe uitlei nie. Sy het een keer met haar om die grasperk geloop terwyl sy haar die hele tyd styf vashou en haar toe weer terug binnetoe geneem. Ek't nie geweet wat om daarvan te dink nie."

Kendra het blykbaar gedink die trek Godric's Hollow toe was die perfekte geleentheid om Ariana eens en vir altyd weg te steek, iets wat sy bes moont-

lik al jare lank beplan het. Die tydsberekening was belangrik. Ariana was skaars sewe jaar oud toe sy uit die oog verdwyn het, en die meeste kenners stem saam dat sewe die ouderdom is wanneer towerkrag homself openbaar, indien dit teenwoordig is. Niemand wat vandag lewe, kan onthou dat Ariana ooit die geringste teken van towerkragvermoëns openbaar het nie. Dit blyk derhalwe dat Kendra besluit het om haar dogter se bestaan weg te steek, eerder as om die skande te verduur om te erken dat sy die lewe aan 'n Misoes geskenk het. Om weg te trek van die vriende en bure wat Ariana geken het, het dit natuurlik baie makliker gemaak om haar opgesluit te hou. Sy kon reken op die klein aantal mense wat voortaan van Ariana se bestaan geweet het om die geheim te bewaar. Dit sluit Ariana se twee broers in, wat ongemaklike vrae omseil het met die antwoord wat hulle ma vir hulle geleer het: "My suster is te sieklik om skool toe te gaan."

Volgende week: Albus Dumbledore by Hogwarts – die pryse en die oëverblindery.

Harry was verkeerd: wat hy gelees het, laat hom inderdaad erger voel. Hy kyk weer na die foto van die skynbaar gelukkige gesin. Is dit waar? Hoe kan hy uitvind? Hy wil na Godric's Hollow toe gaan, selfs al is Bathila nie in staat om met hom te praat nie; hy wil na die plek toe gaan waar hy en Dumbledore albei geliefdes verloor het. Terwyl hy die koerant laat sak om Ron en Hermione se menings te vra, weerklink daar 'n oorverdowende *kraak* deur die kombuis.

Dit is die eerste keer in drie dae dat Harry heeltemal van Skepsel vergeet het. Sy eerste gedagte is dat Lupin weer by die vertrek ingebars het en vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde neem hy nie die bondel spartelende ledemate wat uit die niet reg langs sy stoel verskyn het, in nie. Hy kom vinnig op die been terwyl Skepsel homself ontknoop en dan laag voor Harry buig en kwaak: "Skepsel is terug met die dief Mundungus Fletcher, Meester."

Mundungus skarrel regop en pluk sy towerstaf uit, maar Hermione is te vinnig vir hom.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Mundungus se towerstaf vlieg in die lug op en Hermione vang dit. Met wydgesperde oë, duik Mundungus trap se kant toe, maar Ron keer hom met 'n rugby-laagvat en Mundungus tref die klipvloer met 'n gedempte kraakgeluid.

"Wat?" brul hy en probeer wriemelend uit Ron se greep loskom. "Wat het ek gedoen? Hoekom 'n blessitste huiself op my sit, wat probeer julle doen, wat het ek gedoen, los my, los my, of –"

"Jy's nie eintlik in 'n posisie om dreigemente uit te deel nie," sê

Harry. Hy gooi die koerant eenkant neer, gee 'n paar tree deur die kombuis en gaan sit op sy knieë langs Mundungus wat ophou worstel en angsbevange lyk. Ron staan hygend op en kyk hoe Harry doelbewus met sy towerstaf na Mundungus se neus mik. Mundungus stink na ou sweet en tabakrook; sy hare is gekoek en sy kleed gevlek.

"Skepsel maak verskoning vir die vertraging om die dief hier te kry, Meester," sê die elf hees. "Fletcher weet hoe om laag te lê; hy het baie wegkruipgate en trawante. Nogtans, Skepsel het die dief op die ou end in 'n hoek vasgekeer."

"Jy't jou baie goed van jou taak gekwyt, Skepsel," sê Harry en die elf buig laag.

"Reg, ons het 'n paar vrae vir jou," sê Harry vir Mundungus wat dadelik skree: "Ek het paniekerig geraak, oukei? Ek wou nooit saamgaan nie; ek bedoel dit nie sleg nie, maat, maar ek het nooit aangebied om vir jou dood te gaan nie, en dit was die blessitste Jy-Weet-Wie wat op my afgevlieg het, enigiemand sou dadelik padgegee het, ek het heeltyd gesê ek wil dit nie doen nie –"

"Vir jou inligting, nie een van die res van ons het ge-Disappareer nie," sê Hermione.

"Wel, dan is julle 'n spul bloemen helde, nè, maar ek het nooit voorgegee dat ek my lewe wil wegsmyt –"

"Ons stel nie belang in hoekom jy Maloog in die steek gelaat het nie," onderbreek Harry hom en beweeg sy towerstaf 'n bietjie nader aan Mundungus se sakkerige, bloedbelope oë. "Ons het al klaar geweet jy's 'n onbetroubare stuk skuim."

"Wel, wat de hel maak 'n huiself dan jag op my? Of is dit weer oor daai bekers? Ek het nie een daarvan oor nie, anders sou ek dit vir julle gegee het."

"Dis ook nie oor die bekers nie, al word jy warmer," sê Harry. "Bly stil en luister."

Dit voel wonderlik om iets te hê om te doen, iemand by wie hy op 'n klein deeltjie van die waarheid kan aandring. Harry se towerstaf is nou so naby aan Mundungus se neusbrug dat Mundungus skeel is soos wat hy sy oë daarop probeer hou.

"Toe jy hierdie huis gestroop het van enigiets wat waardevol is," begin Harry, maar Mundungus val hom weer in die rede.

"Sirius was nie gepla oor enige van daai gemors nie –"

Daar is die geluid van trippelende voete, 'n blits van blink koper, 'n kletterende eggo en 'n gil van pyn: Skepsel het Mundungus stormgeloop en hom met 'n pan oor die kop gemoker.

"Hou hom weg van my af, hou hom weg; hy behoort opgesluit

te word!" gil Mundungus en koes toe Skepsel die swaarboompan weer oplig.

"Skepsel, nee!" skree Harry.

Skepsel se dun armpies bewe van die gewig van die pan wat hy nog steeds in die lug hou.

"Miskien net nog een, meester Harry, vir geluk?"

Ron lag.

"Ons het hom by sy volle positiewe nodig, Skepsel, maar as hy oorreding nodig het, kan jy dit doen," sê Harry.

"Baie dankie, Meester," sê Skepsel met 'n buiging en staan 'n entjie terug met sy groot, bleek oë nog steeds vol weersin op Mundungus vasgenael.

"Toe jy die huis gestroop het van al die waardevolle goed wat jy kon kry," begin Harry weer, "het jy 'n klomp goed uit die kombuiskas gevat. Daar was 'n hangertjie." Harry se mond is skielik droog: hy voel Ron en Hermione se spanning en opwinding ook aan. "Wat het jy daarmee gedoen?"

"Hoekom?" vra Mundungus. "Is dit waardevol?"

"Jy het dit nog steeds!" roep Hermione uit.

"Nee, hy het nie," sê Ron skerpsinnig. "Hy wonder of hy meer geld daarvoor moes gevra het."

"Meer?" sê Mundungus. "Dit sou nie flippen moeilik . . . Ek't dit blerrie weggegee. Nie 'n keuse gehad nie."

"Wat bedoel jy?"

"Ek was besig om goed in Diagonaalstraat te verkoop en toe kom sy na my toe en vra of ek 'n lisensie het om handel te dryf in towerartefakte. Blerrie spioen. Wou my beboet, maar toe smaak sy die hangertjie en sê vir my sy gaan dit vat en my dié keer laat loop, en ek kan my sterre dank."

"Wie was die vrou?" vra Harry.

"Weetie, een of ander teef van die Ministerie."

Mundungus dink vir 'n oomblik en plooi sy voorkop.

"Klein vroumens. Strik bo-op haar kop."

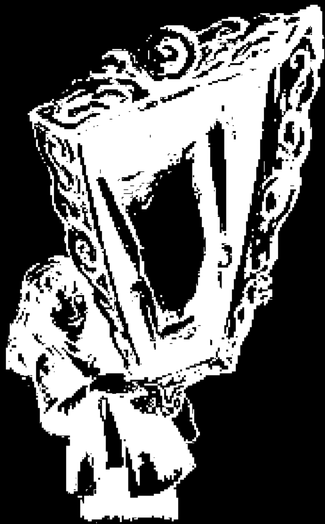
Hy frons en voeg dan by: "Het soos 'n padda gelyk."

Harry laat val sy towerstaf; dit tref Mundungus op die neus en skiet rooi vonke in sy wenkbroue wat aan die brand slaan.

"*Aguamenti!*" skree Hermione en 'n straal water stroom uit haar towerstaf en verswelg 'n hoesende en proesende Mundungus.

Harry kyk op en sien sy eie skok geweerkaats in Ron en Hermione se gesigte. Dit voel of die littekens agterop sy regterhand weer tintel.

CHAPTER TWELVE



MAGIC IS MIGHT

As August wore on, the square of unkempt grass in the middle of Grimmauld Place shriveled in the sun until it was brittle and brown. The inhabitants of number twelve were never seen by anybody in the surrounding houses, and nor was number twelve itself. The Muggles who lived in Grimmauld Place had long since accepted the amusing mistake in the numbering that had caused number eleven to sit beside number thirteen.

And yet the square was now attracting a trickle of visitors who seemed to find the anomaly most intriguing. Barely a day passed without one or two people arriving in Grimmauld Place with no other

purpose, or so it seemed, than to lean against the railings facing numbers eleven and thirteen, watching the join between the two houses. The lurkers were never the same two days running, although they all seemed to share a dislike for normal clothing. Most of the Londoners who passed them were used to eccentric dressers and took little notice, though occasionally one of them might glance back, wondering why anyone would wear such long cloaks in this heat.

The watchers seemed to be gleaning little satisfaction from their vigil. Occasionally one of them started forward excitedly, as if they had seen something interesting at last, only to fall back looking disappointed.

On the first day of September there were more people lurking in the square than ever before. Half a dozen men in long cloaks stood silent and watchful, gazing as ever at houses eleven and thirteen, but the thing for which they were waiting still appeared elusive. As evening drew in, bringing with it an unexpected gust of chilly rain for the first time in weeks, there occurred one of those inexplicable moments when they appeared to have seen something interesting. The man with the twisted face pointed and his closest companion, a podgy, pallid man, started forward, but a moment later they had relaxed into their previous state of inactivity, looking frustrated and disappointed.

Meanwhile, inside number twelve, Harry had just entered the hall. He had nearly lost his balance as he Apparated onto the top step just outside the front door, and thought that the Death Eaters might have caught a glimpse of his momentarily exposed elbow. Shutting the front door carefully behind him, he pulled off the Invisibility Cloak,

draped it over his arm, and hurried along the gloomy hallway toward the door that led to the basement, a stolen copy of the *Daily Prophet* clutched in his hand.

The usual low whisper of *"Severus Snape?"* greeted him, the chill wind swept him, and his tongue rolled up for a moment.

"I didn't kill you," he said, once it had unrolled, then held his breath as the dusty jinx-figure exploded. He waited until he was halfway down the stairs to the kitchen, out of earshot of Mrs. Black and clear of the dust cloud, before calling, "I've got news, and you won't like it."

The kitchen was almost unrecognizable. Every surface now shone: Copper pots and pans had been burnished to a rosy glow; the wooden tabletop gleamed; the goblets and plates already laid for dinner glinted in the light from a merrily blazing fire, on which a cauldron was simmering. Nothing in the room, however, was more dramatically different than the house-elf who now came hurrying toward Harry, dressed in a snowy-white towel, his ear hair as clean and fluffy as cotton wool, Regulus's locket bouncing on his thin chest.

"Shoes off, if you please, Master Harry, and hands washed before dinner," croaked Kreacher, seizing the Invisibility Cloak and slouching off to hang it on a hook on the wall, beside a number of old-fashioned robes that had been freshly laundered.

"What's happened?" Ron asked apprehensively. He and Hermione had been poring over a sheaf of scribbled notes and hand-drawn maps that littered the end of the long kitchen table, but now they watched Harry as he strode toward them and threw down the newspaper on top of their scattered parchment.

A large picture of a familiar, hook-nosed, black-haired man stared up at them all, beneath a headline that read:

SEVERUS SNAPE CONFIRMED AS HOGWARTS HEADMASTER

"No!" said Ron and Hermione loudly.

Hermione was quickest; she snatched up the newspaper and began to read the accompanying story out loud.

"'*Severus Snape, long-standing Potions master at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, was today appointed headmaster in the most important of several staffing changes at the ancient school. Following the resignation of the previous Muggle Studies teacher, Alecto Carrow will take over the post while her brother, Amycus, fills the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts professor.*

"'*I welcome the opportunity to uphold our finest Wizarding traditions and values* —' Like committing murder and cutting off people's ears, I suppose! Snape, headmaster! Snape in Dumbledore's study — Merlin's pants!" she shrieked, making both Harry and Ron jump. She leapt up from the table and hurtled from the room, shouting as she went, "I'll be back in a minute!"

"'Merlin's pants'?" repeated Ron, looking amused. "She must be upset." He pulled the newspaper toward him and perused the article about Snape.

"The other teachers won't stand for this. McGonagall and Flitwick and Sprout all know the truth, they know how Dumbledore died. They won't accept Snape as headmaster. And who are these Carrows?"

"Death Eaters," said Harry. "There are pictures of them inside. They were at the top of the tower when Snape killed Dumbledore, so it's all friends together. And," Harry went on bitterly, drawing up a chair, "I can't see that the other teachers have got any choice but to stay. If the Ministry and Voldemort are behind Snape it'll be a choice between staying and teaching, or a nice few years in Azkaban — and that's if they're lucky. I reckon they'll stay to try and protect the students."

Kreacher came bustling to the table with a large tureen in his hands, and ladled out soup into pristine bowls, whistling between his teeth as he did so.

"Thanks, Kreacher," said Harry, flipping over the *Prophet* so as not to have to look at Snape's face. "Well, at least we know exactly where Snape is now."

He began to spoon soup into his mouth. The quality of Kreacher's cooking had improved dramatically ever since he had been given Regulus's locket: Today's French onion was as good as Harry had ever tasted.

"There are still a load of Death Eaters watching the house," he told Ron as he ate, "more than usual. It's like they're hoping we'll march out carrying our school trunks and head off for the Hogwarts Express."

Ron glanced at his watch.

"I've been thinking about that all day. It left nearly six hours ago. Weird, not being on it, isn't it?"

In his mind's eye Harry seemed to see the scarlet steam engine as he and Ron had once followed it by air, shimmering between fields

and hills, a rippling scarlet caterpillar. He was sure Ginny, Neville, and Luna were sitting together at this moment, perhaps wondering where he, Ron, and Hermione were, or debating how best to undermine Snape's new regime.

"They nearly saw me coming back in just now," Harry said. "I landed badly on the top step, and the Cloak slipped."

"I do that every time. Oh, here she is," Ron added, craning around in his seat to watch Hermione reentering the kitchen. "And what in the name of Merlin's most baggy Y Fronts was that about?"

"I remembered this," Hermione panted.

She was carrying a large, framed picture, which she now lowered to the floor before seizing her small, beaded bag from the kitchen sideboard. Opening it, she proceeded to force the painting inside, and despite the fact that it was patently too large to fit inside the tiny bag, within a few seconds it had vanished, like so much else, into the bag's capacious depths.

"Phineas Nigellus," Hermione explained as she threw the bag onto the kitchen table with the usual sonorous, clanking crash.

"Sorry?" said Ron, but Harry understood. The painted image of Phineas Nigellus Black was able to flit between his portrait in Grimmauld Place and the one that hung in the headmaster's office at Hogwarts: the circular tower-top room where Snape was no doubt sitting right now, in triumphant possession of Dumbledore's collection of delicate, silver magical instruments, the stone Pensieve, the Sorting Hat and, unless it had been moved elsewhere, the sword of Gryffindor.

"Snape could send Phineas Nigellus to look inside this house for

him," Hermione explained to Ron as she resumed her seat. "But let him try it now, all Phineas Nigellus will be able to see is the inside of my handbag."

"Good thinking!" said Ron, looking impressed.

"Thank you," smiled Hermione, pulling her soup toward her. "So, Harry, what else happened today?"

"Nothing," said Harry. "Watched the Ministry entrance for seven hours. No sign of her. Saw your dad, though, Ron. He looks fine."

Ron nodded his appreciation of this news. They had agreed that it was far too dangerous to try and communicate with Mr. Weasley while he walked in and out of the Ministry, because he was always surrounded by other Ministry workers. It was, however, reassuring to catch these glimpses of him, even if he did look very strained and anxious.

"Dad always told us most Ministry people use the Floo Network to get to work," Ron said. "That's why we haven't seen Umbridge, she'd never walk, she'd think she's too important."

"And what about that funny old witch and that little wizard in the navy robes?" Hermione asked.

"Oh yeah, the bloke from Magical Maintenance," said Ron.

"How do you know he works for Magical Maintenance?" Hermione asked, her soupspoon suspended in midair.

"Dad said everyone from Magical Maintenance wears navy blue robes."

"But you never told us that!"

Hermione dropped her spoon and pulled toward her the sheaf of notes and maps that she and Ron had been examining when Harry had

entered the kitchen.

"There's nothing in here about navy blue robes, nothing!" she said, flipping feverishly through the pages.

"Well, does it really matter?"

"Ron, it *all* matters! If we're going to get into the Ministry and not give ourselves away when they're *bound* to be on the lookout for intruders, every little detail matters! We've been over and over this, I mean, what's the point of all these reconnaissance trips if you aren't even bothering to tell us —"

"Blimey, Hermione, I forget one little thing —"

"You do realize, don't you, that there's probably no more dangerous place in the whole world for us to be right now than the Ministry of —"

"I think we should do it tomorrow," said Harry.

Hermione stopped dead, her jaw hanging; Ron choked a little over his soup.

"Tomorrow?" repeated Hermione. "You aren't serious, Harry?"

"I am," said Harry. "I don't think we're going to be much better prepared than we are now even if we skulk around the Ministry entrance for another month. The longer we put it off, the farther away that locket could be. There's already a good chance Umbridge has chucked it away; the thing doesn't open."

"Unless," said Ron, "she's found a way of opening it and she's now possessed."

"Wouldn't make any difference to her, she was so evil in the first place," Harry shrugged.

Hermione was biting her lip, deep in thought.

“We know everything important,” Harry went on, addressing Hermione. “We know they’ve stopped Apparition in and out of the Ministry. We know only the most senior Ministry members are allowed to connect their homes to the Floo Network now, because Ron heard those two Unspeakables complaining about it. And we know roughly where Umbridge’s office is, because of what you heard that bearded bloke saying to his mate —”

“‘I’ll be up on level one, Dolores wants to see me,’” Hermione recited immediately.

“Exactly,” said Harry. “And we know you get in using those funny coins, or tokens, or whatever they are, because I saw that witch borrowing one from her friend —”

“But we haven’t got any!”

“If the plan works, we will have,” Harry continued calmly.

“I don’t know, Harry, I don’t know. . . . There are an awful lot of things that could go wrong, so much relies on chance. . . .”

“That’ll be true even if we spend another three months preparing,” said Harry. “It’s time to act.”

He could tell from Ron’s and Hermione’s faces that they were scared; he was not particularly confident himself, and yet he was sure the time had come to put their plan into operation.

They had spent the previous four weeks taking it in turns to don the Invisibility Cloak and spy on the official entrance to the Ministry, which Ron, thanks to Mr. Weasley, had known since childhood. They had tailed Ministry workers on their way in, eavesdropped on their conversations, and learned by careful observation which of them could be relied upon to appear, alone, at the same time every day.

Occasionally there had been a chance to sneak a *Daily Prophet* out of somebody's briefcase. Slowly they had built up the sketchy maps and notes now stacked in front of Hermione.

"All right," said Ron slowly, "let's say we go for it tomorrow. . . . I think it should just be me and Harry."

"Oh, don't start that again!" sighed Hermione. "I thought we'd settled this."

"It's one thing hanging around the entrances under the Cloak, but this is different, Hermione." Ron jabbed a finger at a copy of the *Daily Prophet* dated ten days previously. "You're on the list of Muggle-borns who didn't present themselves for interrogation!"

"And you're supposed to be dying of spattergroit at the Burrow! If anyone shouldn't go, it's Harry, he's got a ten-thousand-Galleon price on his head —"

"Fine, I'll stay here," said Harry. "Let me know if you ever defeat Voldemort, won't you?"

As Ron and Hermione laughed, pain shot through the scar on Harry's forehead. His hand jumped to it: He saw Hermione's eyes narrow, and he tried to pass off the movement by brushing his hair out of his eyes.

"Well, if all three of us go we'll have to Disapparate separately," Ron was saying. "We can't all fit under the Cloak anymore."

Harry's scar was becoming more and more painful. He stood up. At once, Kreacher hurried forward.

"Master has not finished his soup, would Master prefer the savory stew, or else the treacle tart to which Master is so partial?"

"Thanks, Kreacher, but I'll be back in a minute — er —

bathroom."

Aware that Hermione was watching him suspiciously, Harry hurried up the stairs to the hall and then to the first landing, where he dashed into the bathroom and bolted the door again. Grunting with pain, he slumped over the black basin with its taps in the form of open-mouthed serpents and closed his eyes. . . .

He was gliding along a twilit street. The buildings on either side of him had high, timbered gables; they looked like gingerbread houses.

He approached one of them, then saw the whiteness of his own long-fingered hand against the door. He knocked. He felt a mounting excitement. . . .

The door opened: A laughing woman stood there. Her face fell as she looked into Harry's face: humor gone, terror replacing it. . . .

"Gregorovitch?" said a high, cold voice.

She shook her head: She was trying to close the door. A white hand held it steady, prevented her shutting him out. . . .

"I want Gregorovitch."

"Er wohnt hier nicht mehr!" she cried, shaking her head. "He no live here! He no live here! I know him not!"

Abandoning the attempt to close the door, she began to back away down the dark hall, and Harry followed, gliding toward her, and his long-fingered hand had drawn his wand.

"Where is he?"

"*Das weiß ich nicht!* He move! I know not, I know not!"

He raised the wand. She screamed. Two young children came running into the hall. She tried to shield them with her arms. There

was a flash of green light —

“Harry! HARRY!”

He opened his eyes; he had sunk to the floor. Hermione was pounding on the door again.

“Harry, open up!”

He had shouted out, he knew it. He got up and unbolted the door; Hermione toppled inside at once, regained her balance, and looked around suspiciously. Ron was right behind her, looking unnerved as he pointed his wand into the corners of the chilly bathroom.

“What were you doing?” asked Hermione sternly.

“What d’you think I was doing?” asked Harry with feeble bravado.

“You were yelling your head off!” said Ron.

“Oh yeah . . . I must’ve dozed off or —”

“Harry, please don’t insult our intelligence,” said Hermione, taking deep breaths. “We know your scar hurt downstairs, and you’re white as a sheet.”

Harry sat down on the edge of the bath.

“Fine. I’ve just seen Voldemort murdering a woman. By now he’s probably killed her whole family. And he didn’t need to. It was Cedric all over again, they were just *there*. . . .”

“Harry, you aren’t supposed to let this happen anymore!” Hermione cried, her voice echoing through the bathroom. “Dumbledore wanted you to use Occlumency! He thought the connection was dangerous — Voldemort can *use* it, Harry! What good is it to watch him kill and torture, how can it help?”

“Because it means I know what he’s doing,” said Harry.

“So you’re not even going to *try* to shut him out?”

“Hermione, I can’t. You know I’m lousy at Occlumency, I never got the hang of it.”

“You never really tried!” she said hotly. “I don’t get it, Harry — do you *like* having this special connection or relationship or what — whatever —”

She faltered under the look he gave her as he stood up.

“Like it?” he said quietly. “Would *you* like it?”

“I — no — I’m sorry, Harry, I didn’t mean —”

“I hate it, I hate the fact that he can get inside me, that I have to watch him when he’s most dangerous. But I’m going to use it.”

“Dumbledore —”

“Forget Dumbledore. This is my choice, nobody else’s. I want to know why he’s after Gregorovitch.”

“Who?”

“He’s a foreign wandmaker,” said Harry. “He made Krum’s wand and Krum reckons he’s brilliant.”

“But according to you,” said Ron, “Voldemort’s got Ollivander locked up somewhere. If he’s already got a wandmaker, what does he need another one for?”

“Maybe he agrees with Krum, maybe he thinks Gregorovitch is better . . . or else he thinks Gregorovitch will be able to explain what my wand did when he was chasing me, because Ollivander didn’t know.”

Harry glanced into the cracked, dusty mirror and saw Ron and Hermione exchanging skeptical looks behind his back.

"Harry, you keep talking about what your wand did," said Hermione, "but *you* made it happen! Why are you so determined not to take responsibility for your own power?"

"Because I know it wasn't me! And so does Voldemort, Hermione! We both know what really happened!"

They glared at each other: Harry knew that he had not convinced Hermione and that she was marshaling counterarguments, against both his theory on his wand and the fact that he was permitting himself to see into Voldemort's mind. To his relief, Ron intervened.

"Drop it," he advised her. "It's up to him. And if we're going to the Ministry tomorrow, don't you reckon we should go over the plan?"

Reluctantly, as the other two could tell, Hermione let the matter rest, though Harry was quite sure she would attack again at the first opportunity. In the meantime, they returned to the basement kitchen, where Kreacher served them all stew and treacle tart.

They did not get to bed until late that night, after spending hours going over and over their plan until they could recite it, word perfect, to each other. Harry, who was now sleeping in Sirius's room, lay in bed with his wandlight trained on the old photograph of his father, Sirius, Lupin, and Pettigrew, and muttered the plan to himself for another ten minutes. As he extinguished his wand, however, he was thinking not of Polyjuice Potion, Puking Pastilles, or the navy blue robes of Magical Maintenance; he thought of Gregorovitch the wandmaker, and how long he could hope to remain hidden while Voldemort sought him so determinedly.

Dawn seemed to follow midnight with indecent haste.

"You look terrible," was Ron's greeting as he entered the room to wake Harry.

"Not for long," said Harry, yawning.

They found Hermione downstairs in the kitchen. She was being served coffee and hot rolls by Kreacher and wearing the slightly manic expression that Harry associated with exam review.

"Robes," she said under her breath, acknowledging their presence with a nervous nod and continuing to poke around in her beaded bag, "Polyjuice Potion . . . Invisibility Cloak . . . Decoy Detonators . . . You should each take a couple just in case. . . . Puking Pastilles, Nosebleed Nougat, Extendable Ears . . ."

They gulped down their breakfast, then set off upstairs, Kreacher bowing them out and promising to have a steak-and-kidney pie ready for them when they returned.

"Bless him," said Ron fondly, "and when you think I used to fantasize about cutting off his head and sticking it on the wall."

They made their way onto the front step with immense caution: They could see a couple of puffy-eyed Death Eaters watching the house from across the misty square.

Hermione Disapparated with Ron first, then came back for Harry.

After the usual brief spell of darkness and near suffocation, Harry found himself in the tiny alleyway where the first phase of their plan was scheduled to take place. It was as yet deserted, except for a couple of large bins; the first Ministry workers did not usually appear here until at least eight o'clock.

"Right then," said Hermione, checking her watch. "She ought to be here in about five minutes. When I've Stunned her —"

“Hermione, we know,” said Ron sternly. “And I thought we were supposed to open the door before she got here?”

Hermione squealed.

“I nearly forgot! Stand back —”

She pointed her wand at the padlocked and heavily graffitied fire door beside them, which burst open with a crash. The dark corridor behind it led, as they knew from their careful scouting trips, into an empty theater. Hermione pulled the door back toward her, to make it look as though it was still closed.

“And now,” she said, turning back to face the other two in the alleyway, “we put on the Cloak again —”

“— and we wait,” Ron finished, throwing it over Hermione’s head like a blanket over a birdcage and rolling his eyes at Harry.

Little more than a minute later, there was a tiny *pop* and a little Ministry witch with flyaway gray hair Apparated feet from them, blinking a little in the sudden brightness; the sun had just come out from behind a cloud. She barely had time to enjoy the unexpected warmth, however, before Hermione’s silent Stunning Spell hit her in the chest and she toppled over.

“Nicely done, Hermione,” said Ron, emerging from behind a bin beside the theater door as Harry took off the Invisibility Cloak. Together they carried the little witch into the dark passageway that led backstage. Hermione plucked a few hairs from the witch’s head and added them to a flask of muddy Polyjuice Potion she had taken from the beaded bag. Ron was rummaging through the little witch’s handbag.

“She’s Mafalda Hopkirk,” he said, reading a small card that

identified their victim as an assistant in the Improper Use of Magic Office. “You’d better take this, Hermione, and here are the tokens.”

He passed her several small golden coins, all embossed with the letters M.O.M., which he had taken from the witch’s purse.

Hermione drank the Polyjuice Potion, which was now a pleasant heliotrope color, and within seconds stood before them, the double of Mafalda Hopkirk. As she removed Mafalda’s spectacles and put them on, Harry checked his watch.

“We’re running late, Mr. Magical Maintenance will be here any second.”

They hurried to close the door on the real Mafalda; Harry and Ron threw the Invisibility Cloak over themselves but Hermione remained in view, waiting. Seconds later there was another *pop,* and a small, ferrety-looking wizard appeared before them.

“Oh, hello, Mafalda.”

“Hello!” said Hermione in a quavery voice. “How are you today?”

“Not so good, actually,” replied the little wizard, who looked thoroughly downcast.

As Hermione and the wizard headed for the main road, Harry and Ron crept along behind them.

“I’m sorry to hear you’re under the weather,” said Hermione, talking firmly over the little wizard as he tried to expound upon his problems; it was essential to stop him from reaching the street. “Here, have a sweet.”

“Eh? Oh, no thanks —”

“I insist!” said Hermione aggressively, shaking the bag of pastilles in his face. Looking rather alarmed, the little wizard took one.

The effect was instantaneous. The moment the pastille touched his tongue, the little wizard started vomiting so hard that he did not even notice as Hermione yanked a handful of hairs from the top of his head.

"Oh dear!" she said, as he splattered the alley with sick. "Perhaps you'd better take the day off!"

"No — no!" He choked and retched, trying to continue on his way despite being unable to walk straight. "I must — today — must go —"

"But that's just silly!" said Hermione, alarmed. "You can't go to work in this state — I think you ought to go to St. Mungo's and get them to sort you out!"

The wizard had collapsed, heaving, onto all fours, still trying to crawl toward the main street.

"You simply can't go to work like this!" cried Hermione.

At last he seemed to accept the truth of her words. Using a repulsed Hermione to claw his way back into a standing position, he turned on the spot and vanished, leaving nothing behind but the bag Ron had snatched from his hand as he went and some flying chunks of vomit.

"Urgh," said Hermione, holding up the skirts of her robe to avoid the puddles of sick. "It would have made much less mess to Stun him too."

"Yeah," said Ron, emerging from under the cloak holding the wizard's bag, "but I still think a whole pile of unconscious bodies would have drawn more attention. Keen on his job, though, isn't he? Chuck us the hair and the potion, then."

Within two minutes, Ron stood before them, as small and ferrety as the sick wizard, and wearing the navy blue robes that had been folded in his bag.

"Weird he wasn't wearing them today, wasn't it, seeing how much he wanted to go? Anyway, I'm Reg Cattermole, according to the label in the back."

"Now wait here," Hermione told Harry, who was still under the Invisibility Cloak, "and we'll be back with some hairs for you."

He had to wait ten minutes, but it seemed much longer to Harry, skulking alone in the sick-splattered alleyway beside the door concealing the Stunned Mafalda. Finally Ron and Hermione reappeared.

"We don't know who he is," Hermione said, passing Harry several curly black hairs, "but he's gone home with a dreadful nosebleed! Here, he's pretty tall, you'll need bigger robes. . . ."

She pulled out a set of the old robes Kreacher had laundered for them, and Harry retired to take the potion and change.

Once the painful transformation was complete he was more than six feet tall and, from what he could tell from his well-muscled arms, powerfully built. He also had a beard. Stowing the Invisibility Cloak and his glasses inside his new robes, he rejoined the other two.

"Blimey, that's scary," said Ron, looking up at Harry, who now towered over him.

"Take one of Mafalda's tokens," Hermione told Harry, "and let's go, it's nearly nine."

They stepped out of the alleyway together. Fifty yards along the crowded pavement there were spiked black railings flanking two

flights of steps, one labeled GENTLEMEN, the other LADIES.

"See you in a moment, then," said Hermione nervously, and she tottered off down the steps to LADIES. Harry and Ron joined a number of oddly dressed men descending into what appeared to be an ordinary underground public toilet, tiled in grimy black and white.

"Morning, Reg!" called another wizard in navy blue robes as he let himself into a cubicle by inserting his golden token into a slot in the door. "Blooming pain in the bum, this, eh? Forcing us all to get to work this way! Who are they expecting to turn up, Harry Potter?"

The wizard roared with laughter at his own wit. Ron gave a forced chuckle.

"Yeah," he said, "stupid, isn't it?"

And he and Harry let themselves into adjoining cubicles.

To Harry's left and right came the sound of flushing. He crouched down and peered through the gap at the bottom of the cubicle, just in time to see a pair of booted feet climbing into the toilet next door. He looked left and saw Ron blinking at him.

"We have to flush ourselves in?" he whispered.

"Looks like it," Harry whispered back; his voice came out deep and gravelly.

They both stood up. Feeling exceptionally foolish, Harry clambered into the toilet.

He knew at once that he had done the right thing; though he appeared to be standing in water, his shoes, feet, and robes remained quite dry. He reached up, pulled the chain, and next moment had zoomed down a short chute, emerging out of a fireplace into the Ministry of Magic.

He got up clumsily; there was a lot more of his body than he was accustomed to. The great Atrium seemed darker than Harry remembered it. Previously a golden fountain had filled the center of the hall, casting shimmering spots of light over the polished wooden floor and walls. Now a gigantic statue of black stone dominated the scene. It was rather frightening, this vast sculpture of a witch and a wizard sitting on ornately carved thrones, looking down at the Ministry workers toppling out of fireplaces below them. Engraved in foot-high letters at the base of the statue were the words MAGIC IS MIGHT.

Harry received a heavy blow on the back of the legs: Another wizard had just flown out of the fireplace behind him.

"Out of the way, can't y — oh, sorry, Runcorn!"

Clearly frightened, the balding wizard hurried away. Apparently the man whom Harry was impersonating, Runcorn, was intimidating.

"Psst!" said a voice, and he looked around to see a wispy little witch and the ferrety wizard from Magical Maintenance gesturing to him from over beside the statue. Harry hastened to join them.

"You got in all right, then?" Hermione whispered to Harry.

"No, he's still stuck in the bog," said Ron.

"Oh, very funny . . . It's horrible, isn't it?" she said to Harry, who was staring up at the statue. "Have you seen what they're sitting on?"

Harry looked more closely and realized that what he had thought were decoratively carved thrones were actually mounds of carved humans: hundreds and hundreds of naked bodies, men, women, and children, all with rather stupid, ugly faces, twisted and pressed together to support the weight of the handsomely robed wizards.

"Muggles," whispered Hermione. "In their rightful place. Come on, let's get going."

They joined the stream of witches and wizards moving toward the golden gates at the end of the hall, looking around as surreptitiously as possible, but there was no sign of the distinctive figure of Dolores Umbridge. They passed through the gates and into a smaller hall, where queues were forming in front of twenty golden grilles housing as many lifts. They had barely joined the nearest one when a voice said, "Cattermole!"

They looked around: Harry's stomach turned over. One of the Death Eaters who had witnessed Dumbledore's death was striding toward them. The Ministry workers beside them fell silent, their eyes downcast; Harry could feel fear rippling through them. The man's scowling, slightly brutish face was somehow at odds with his magnificent, sweeping robes, which were embroidered with much gold thread. Someone in the crowd around the lifts called sycophantically, "Morning, Yaxley!" Yaxley ignored them.

"I requested somebody from Magical Maintenance to sort out my office, Cattermole. It's still raining in there."

Ron looked around as though hoping somebody else would intervene, but nobody spoke.

"Raining . . . in your office? That's — that's not good, is it?"

Ron gave a nervous laugh. Yaxley's eyes widened.

"You think it's funny, Cattermole, do you?"

A pair of witches broke away from the queue for the lift and bustled off.

"No," said Ron, "no, of course —"

"You realize that I am on my way downstairs to interrogate your wife, Cattermole? In fact, I'm quite surprised you're not down there holding her hand while she waits. Already given her up as a bad job, have you? Probably wise. Be sure and marry a pureblood next time."

Hermione had let out a little squeak of horror. Yaxley looked at her. She coughed feebly and turned away.

"I — I —" stammered Ron.

"But if *my* wife were accused of being a Mudblood," said Yaxley, "— not that any woman I married would ever be mistaken for such filth — and the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement needed a job doing, I would make it my priority to do that job, Cattermole. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," whispered Ron.

"Then attend to it, Cattermole, and if my office is not completely dry within an hour, your wife's Blood Status will be in even graver doubt than it is now."

The golden grille before them clattered open. With a nod and unpleasant smile to Harry, who was evidently expected to appreciate this treatment of Cattermole, Yaxley swept away toward another lift. Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered theirs, but nobody followed them: It was as if they were infectious. The grilles shut with a clang and the lift began to move upward.

"What am I going to do?" Ron asked the other two at once; he looked stricken. "If I don't turn up, my wife — I mean, Cattermole's wife —"

"We'll come with you, we should stick together —" began Harry, but Ron shook his head feverishly.

"That's mental, we haven't got much time. You two find Umbridge, I'll go and sort out Yaxley's office — but how do I stop it raining?"

"Try Finite Incantatem," said Hermione at once, "that should stop the rain if it's a hex or curse; if it doesn't, something's gone wrong with an Atmospheric Charm, which will be more difficult to fix, so as an interim measure try Impervius to protect his belongings —"

"Say it again, slowly —" said Ron, searching his pockets desperately for a quill, but at that moment the lift juddered to a halt. A disembodied female voice said, "Level four, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, incorporating Beast, Being, and Spirit Divisions, Goblin Liaison Office, and Pest Advisory Bureau," and the grilles slid open again, admitting a couple of wizards and several pale violet paper airplanes that fluttered around the lamp in the ceiling of the lift.

"Morning, Albert," said a bushily whiskered man, smiling at Harry. He glanced over at Ron and Hermione as the lift creaked upward once more; Hermione was now whispering frantic instructions to Ron. The wizard leaned toward Harry, leering, and muttered, "Dirk Cresswell, eh? From Goblin Liaison? Nice one, Albert. I'm pretty confident I'll get his job now!"

He winked. Harry smiled back, hoping that this would suffice. The lift stopped; the grilles opened once more.

"Level two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters, and Wizengamot Administration Services," said the disembodied witch's voice.

Harry saw Hermione give Ron a little push and he hurried out of

the lift, followed by the other wizards, leaving Harry and Hermione alone. The moment the golden door had closed Hermione said, very fast, "Actually, Harry, I think I'd better go after him, I don't think he knows what he's doing and if he gets caught the whole thing —"

"Level one, Minister of Magic and Support Staff."

The golden grilles slid apart again and Hermione gasped. Four people stood before them, two of them deep in conversation: a long-haired wizard wearing magnificent robes of black and gold, and a squat, toadlike witch wearing a velvet bow in her short hair and clutching a clipboard to her chest.

— HOOFSTUK TWAALF —

Towerkrag is Mag

Soos Augustus verbygaan, verskrompel die onversorgde grasvierkant in die middel van Grimmauldplein in die son tot dit bros en bruin is. Niemand in die naburige huise sien nommer twaalf se inwoners nie, en ook nie nommer twaalf self nie. Die Moggels wat in Grimmauldplein woon, het lank gelede reeds die amusante fout met die nommers aanvaar wat veroorsaak het dat nommer elf langsaan nommer dertien is.

Nogtans lok die plein nou drupsgewys besoekers wat hierdie onreëlmatigheid blykbaar baie interessant vind. Daar gaan skaars 'n dag om sonder dat een of twee mense in Grimmauldplein aankom met geen ander doel nie, altans so lyk dit, as om teen die relings voor nommers elf en dertien te leun en die gemeenskaplike muur tussen die twee huise dop te hou. Die loerders is nooit twee dae ná mekaar dieselfde mense nie, hoewel hulle almal blykbaar 'n teensin in gewone kleredrag het. Die meeste Londenaars wat verby hulle loop, is gewoond aan mense wat eksentriek aantrek en neem skaars notisie van hulle, hoewel een van hulle dalk soms omkyk en wonder hoekom enigiemand in hierdie hitte so 'n lang mantel dra.

Die waarnemers put oënskynlik min plesier uit hulle wagstanery. Af en toe leun een van hulle opgewonde vorentoe, asof daar uiteindelik iets interessants gebeur, net om dan weer teleurgesteld terug te staan.

Op die eerste dag van September sluip daar meer mense as ooit vantevore op die plein rond. 'n Halfdosyn mans in lang mantels hou huise elf en dertien stil en waaksaam soos altyd dop, maar dit waarvoor hulle wag, ontwyk hulle skynbaar nog steeds. Toe dit aand word, is daar vir die eerste keer in weke 'n vlaag koue reën wat gepaardgaan met een van daardie onverklaarbare oomblikke wanneer hulle blykbaar iets interessants sien. Die man met die verwronge gesig wys na iets en sy naaste makker, 'n gesette, asvaal mannetjie, mik vorentoe, maar 'n oomblik later ontspan hulle in passiwiteit soos voorheen, gefrustreerd en teleurgesteld.

Intussen het Harry so pas by nommer twaalf se voorportaal ingekom. Hy het amper sy balans verloor toe hy op die boonste trap net buite die voordeur ge-Appareer het en wonder nou of die Doodseters dalk sy elmboog, wat vir 'n oomblik uitgesteek het, skrams raakgesien het. Hy maak die voordeur versigtig agter hom toe, haal die Onsigbaarheidsmantel van hom af, gooi dit oor sy arm en loop haastig deur die somber voorportaal na die deur wat kelder toe lei met 'n gesteelde eksemplaar van die *Daaglikse Profeet* in sy hand vasgeklem.

Die gewone lae gefluister van *"Severus Snape?"* begroet hom en die yswind tref hom en rol sy tong vir 'n oomblik op.

"Ek het jou nie vermoor nie," sê hy toe sy tong weer afgerol het, en hou dan asem op terwyl die stowwerige paljasfiguur ontplof. Hy wag tot hy halfpad met die trap af kombuis toe en buite hoorafstand van mevrou Black is voor hy uitroep: "Ek het nuus, en julle gaan nie daarvan hou nie!"

Die kombuis is amper onherkenbaar. Al die oppervlakke blink nou: koperpotte en -panne is gepoets tot 'n rosige gloed, die hout-tafel se blad glinster, die bekers en borde wat reeds vir aandete gedek is, blink in die lig van die vuur wat vrolik onder 'n pruttende hekseketel knetter. Niks in die vertrek het egter meer dramaties verander as die huiself wat nou haastig na Harry toe aanskuifel nie: hy dra 'n spierwit handdoek, die hare in sy ore is so skoon en wol-lerig soos watte en Regulus se hangertjie bons op sy dun borskas.

"Skoene uit, asseblief, meester Harry, en hande was voor aand-ete," kwaak Skepsel terwyl hy die Onsigbaarheidsmantel vat en wegskarrel om dit aan 'n haak teen die muur te gaan ophang langs 'n paar outydse klede wat vars gewas en gestryk is.

"Wat het gebeur?" vra Ron besorg. Hy en Hermione het 'n stapel bekrapte notas en handgetekende kaarte wat aan die een kant van die lang tafel rondgestrooi lê, gesit en bestudeer, maar nou hou hulle vir Harry dop wat tot by hulle loop en die koerant op hulle deurmekaar perkamente neergooi.

'n Groot foto van 'n bekende swartkop man met 'n haakneus staar na hulle toe op en die opskrif daaronder lees: *SEVERUS SNAPE AANGESTEL AS HOGWARTS SE SKOOLHOOF.*

"Nee!" roep Ron en Hermione saam hard uit.

Hermione is die vinnigste; sy raap die koerant op en begin die bygaande storie hardop voorlees.

"'Severus Snape, lank reeds die Towerdrankie-onderwyser by Hogwarts Skool vir Towerkuns en Heksery, is vandag aangestel as skoolhoof in die belangrikste van verskeie personeelskommelings by die eeue oue

skool. Ná die vorige Moggelstudies-onderwyser se bedanking sal Alecto Carrow hierdie pos oorneem terwyl haar broer, Amycus, die pos van Verdediging Teen die Donker Kunste-onderwyser sal beklee.

"*'Ek verwelkom die geleentheid om ons suiwerste towertradisies en waardes te handhaaf –*"' Soos om moord te pleeg en mense se ore af te sny! Snape skoolhoof, byvoorbeeld! Snape in Dumbledore se studeerkamer – Merlin se broek!" skree Hermione skril en laat Harry en Ron wip van skrik. Sy spring van die tafel af op en vlieg by die vertrek uit terwyl sy skree: "Ek's nou-nou terug!"

"'Merlin se broek?'" herhaal Ron en lyk geamuseerd. "Sy moet baie omgekrap wees." Hy trek die koerant nader en lees die artikel oor Snape noukeurig.

"Die ander onderwysers sal dit nie toelaat nie. McGonagall en Flitwick en Sprout ken almal die waarheid; hulle weet hoe Dumbledore dood is. Hulle sal Snape nie as skoolhoof aanvaar nie. En wie's hierdie Carrows?"

"Doodseters," sê Harry. "Daar's foto's van hulle binne-in. Hulle was daar bo-op die Toring toe Snape Dumbledore vermoor het, so dis alles baie gesellig. En," vervolg Harry bitter terwyl hy 'n stoel uittrek, "ek kan nie sien dat die ander onderwysers enige ander keuse het as om aan te bly nie. As die Ministerie en Voldemort Snape ondersteun, sal dit 'n keuse wees tussen bly en skoolhou, of 'n lekker paar jaar in Azkaban – en dis as hulle gelukkig is. Ek dink hulle sal bly om die studente te probeer beskerm."

Skepsel beweeg haastig na die tafel toe met 'n groot kom in sy hande en skep vir hulle sop in silwerskoon kommetjies uit terwyl hy deur sy tande fluit.

"Dankie, Skepsel," sê Harry en draai die *Profeet* om sodat hy nie na Snape se gesig hoef te kyk nie. "Wel, ons weet ten minste nou presies waar Snape is."

Hy begin lepels vol sop eet. Die kwaliteit van Skepsel se kookkuns het dramaties verbeter vandat hy Regulus se hangertjie present gekry het: vandag se Franse uiesop is so goed soos die beste wat Harry al ooit geproe het.

"Daar is nog steeds 'n spul Doodseters wat die huis dophou," sê hy vir Ron terwyl hy eet, "meer as gewoonlik. Dis asof hulle hoop ons gaan met ons skooltrommels hier uitmarsjeer om op die Hogwarts Express te klim."

Ron kyk vlugtig na sy horlosie.

"Ek dink al heeldag daaraan. Die trein het amper ses uur gelede vertrek. Dis vreemd om nie daarop te wees nie, nè?"

Voor sy geestesoog sien Harry die helderrooi stoomlokomotief

soos wat hy en Ron dit eenkeer deur die lug gevolg het, glinsterend tussen landerye en heuwels deur, 'n kronkelende skarlaken ruspe. Hy is seker Ginny, Neville en Luna sit op hierdie oomblik saam; miskien wonder hulle waar hy, Ron en Hermione is, of praat oor wat die beste manier sal wees om Snape se nuwe regime te ondermyn.

"Hulle het my netnou amper gesien terugkom," sê Harry. "Ek het sleg op die boonste trap geland en die mantel het effens afgeglip."

"Dit gebeur elke keer met my. O, hier is sy," voeg Ron by wat in sy stoel omdraai om te kyk hoe Hermione by die kombuis inkom. "En waar in die naam van Merlin se sakkerigste onderbroek was jy?"

"Ek het hiervan onthou," hyg Hermione.

Sy dra 'n groot, geraamde portret wat sy nou op die vloer neersit voor sy haar klein kraletjiehandsak uit die kombuiskas gaan haal. Sy maak dit oop en begin die skildery daarin prop, en ondanks die feit dat dit duidelik te groot is om in die klein sakkie te pas, verdwyn dit binne enkele sekondes soos soveel ander dinge in die handsak se ruim dieptes.

"Phineas Nigellus," verduidelik Hermione terwyl sy die handsak met die gewone dawerende, rammelende gegalm op die kombuistafel neergooi.

"Ekskuus?" sê Ron, maar Harry verstaan. Phineas Nigellus Black se geskilderde afbeelding kan rondloop tussen sy portret in Grimmauldplein en die een in die skoolhoof se kantoor in Hogwarts: die sirkelvormige vertrek bo in die toring waar Snape ongetwyfeld nou sit, triomfantlik in besit van Dumbledore se versameling delikate silwer towerinstrumente, die Peinssif van klip, die Sorteerhoed en, tensy dit iewers anders heen geneem is, Gryffindor se swaard.

"Snape kon Phineas Nigellus gestuur het om hier in dié huis vir hom te kom rondkyk," verduidelik Hermione vir Ron terwyl sy weer kom sit. "Maar laat hom nou probeer, dan is al wat Phineas Nigellus kan sien, die binnekant van my handsak."

"Slim van jou!" sê Ron en lyk beïndruk.

"Dankie," glimlag Hermione en trek haar sop nader. "So, Harry, wat anders het vandag gebeur?"

"Niks," sê Harry. "Ek het die Ministerie se ingang sewe uur lank dopgehou. G'n teken van haar nie. Maar ek het jou pa gesien, Ron. Hy lyk oukei."

Ron knik dankbaar oor hierdie nuus. Hulle het saam besluit dit sal gans te gevaarlik wees om met meneer Weasley te probeer kommunikeer terwyl hy by die Ministerie in- en uitloop, want hy is altyd omring deur ander Ministerie-werkers. Dit is egter gerusstel-

lend om hom so vlugtig te sien, selfs al lyk hy baie gespanne en bekommerd.

"Pa het altyd vir ons vertel die meeste van die Ministerie se mense gebruik die Floo-netwerk om by die werk te kom," sê Ron. "Dis hoekom ons Umbridge nog nie gesien het nie; sy sal nooit soontoe loop nie, sy dink sy's te belangrik."

"En wat van daardie snaakse ou heks en daai klein towenaartjie in die vlootblou kleed?" vra Hermione.

"O ja, die ou van Magiese Instandhouding," sê Ron.

"Hoe weet jy hy werk vir Towerinstandhouding?" vra Hermione en haar soplepel huiwer in die lug.

"Pa het gesê almal van Towerinstandhouding dra 'n vlootblou kleed."

"Maar jy't dit nooit vir ons gesê nie!"

Hermione laat val haar lepel en trek die stapel notas en kaarte nader wat sy en Ron bestudeer het tot Harry by die kombuis ingekom het.

"Daar's niks hierin van vlootblou klede nie, niks!" sê sy en blaai koorsagtig deur die bladsye.

"Wel, maak dit regtig saak?"

"Ron, dit maak *absoluut* saak! As ons by die Ministerie wil inkom sonder om gevang te word terwyl hulle *vir seker* op die uitkyk is vir indringers, maak elke klein detail saak! Ons is al oor en oor hierdeur, ek bedoel, wat help al hierdie verkenningstogte as jy jou nie eens verwerdig om vir ons te vertel –"

"Demmit, Hermione, ek het net een klein dingetjie vergeet –"

"Ek hoop jy besef daar is op hierdie oomblik heel moontlik nie 'n gevaarliker plek in die hele wêreld vir ons as die Ministerie van –"

"Ek dink ons moet dit môre doen," sê Harry.

Hermione verstar; haar mond val oop. Ron stik effens in sy sop.

"Môre?" herhaal Hermione. "Jy's nie ernstig nie, Harry?"

"Ek is," sê Harry. "Ek dink nie ons gaan veel beter voorbereid wees as wat ons nou is nie – selfs al sluip ons vir nog 'n maand daar by die Ministerie se ingang rond. Hoe langer ons dit uitstel, hoe verder weg kan die hangertjie wees. Daar is al klaar 'n goeie kans dat Umbridge dit weggegooi het; die ding maak nie oop nie."

"Behalwe," sê Ron, "as sy 'n manier gekry het om dit oop te maak en sy nou besete is."

"Dit sal g'n verskil aan haar maak nie; sy is nog van altyd af boos," sê Harry skouerophalend.

Hermione byt haar lip, diep ingedagte.

"Ons weet al die belangrike dinge," praat Harry verder met

Hermione. "Ons weet hulle het Apparering in en uit by die Ministerie stopgesit. Ons weet net die heel seniorste lede van die Ministerie word nou toegelaat om hulle huis met die Floo-netwerk te verbind, want Ron het daardie twee Onnoembares daaroor hoor kla. En ons weet rofweg waar Umbridge se kantoor is, ná wat jy daai ou met die baard vir sy vriend hoor sê het –"

"*'Ek gaan op eerste verdieping toe; Dolores wil my spreek,'*" resiteer Hermione dadelik.

"Presies," sê Harry. "En ons weet jy kom in deur daardie snaakse muntstukke of tekenmunte of wat dit ook al is, te gebruik, want ek het gesien hoe leen daardie heks een by haar vriendin –"

"Maar ons het nie so iets nie!"

"As ons plan werk, sal ons daarvan hê," gaan Harry kalm verder.

"Ek weet nie, Harry ek weet nie . . . Daar is verskriklik baie dinge wat verkeerd kan gaan; soveel hang van geluk af . . ."

"Dit sal altyd so wees, selfs al berei 'n mens jou vir nog drie maande voor," sê Harry. "Dis tyd om op te tree."

Hy kan aan Ron en Hermione se gesigte sien hulle is bang; hy voel ook nie besonder selfversekerd nie, maar hy is nogtans seker dit het tyd geword om hulle plan in werking te stel.

Hulle het die afgelope vier weke beurte gemaak om die Onsigbaarheidsmantel oor hulle te gooi en te gaan spioeneer op die Ministerie se amptelike ingang wat Ron danksy meneer Weasley van kleins af ken. Hulle het die Ministerie se werkers op pad binnetoe agtervolg, hulle gesprekke afgeluister en met noukeurige waarneming uitgevind wie van hulle kom elke dag op dieselfde tyd alleen daar aan. Soms was daar kans om 'n *Daaglikse Profeet* uit iemand se aktetas te skaai. So het hulle geleidelik die stapel rofweg getekende kaarte en notas wat nou voor Hermione lê, opgebou.

"Orraait," sê Ron stadig, "sê ons doen dit môre . . . Ek dink dit moet net ek en Harry wees."

"Og, moenie weer daarmee begin nie!" sug Hermione. "Ek dog ons het klaar daaroor gepraat."

"Dis een ding om onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel by die ingange rond te hang, maar hierdie is iets anders, Hermione." Ron beduie met sy vinger na 'n eksemplaar van tien dae gelede se *Daaglikse Profeet*. "Jy's op die lys van Moggelgeborenes wat hulle nie vir ondervraging aangemeld het nie!"

"En jy's veronderstel om sterwend aan waterpokkies by Die Konynenes te wees! As iemand nie behoort te gaan nie, dan is dit Harry; daar is 'n prys van tienduisend Galjoene op sy kop –"

"Oukei, ek sal hier bly," sê Harry. "Laat weet my as julle Voldemort ooit verslaan, oukei?"

Terwyl Ron en Hermione lag, skiet 'n steekpyn deur die litteken op Harry se voorkop. Sy hand vlieg op soontoe: hy sien Hermione se oë vernou en probeer die beweging kamoefleer deur sy hare uit sy oë te vee.

"Wel, as ons al drie gaan, sal ons apart moet Disappareeer," sê Ron. "Ons pas nie meer almal onder die Mantel in nie."

Harry se litteken pyn al hoe meer. Hy staan op. Skepsel skarrel haastig nader.

"Meester het nie sy sop opgeëet nie. Verkies Meester die kruiebredie of anders die strooptert waaroor Meester so erg is?"

"Dankie, Skepsel, maar ek is oor 'n paar minute weer terug – e – badkamer."

Harry is daarvan bewus dat Hermione hom agterdogtig dophou terwyl hy hom trapop haas na die ingangsportaal en dan op na die eerste trapportaal toe waar hy by die badkamer instorm en die deur op knip sit. Hy sak kreunend van pyn inmekaar oor die swart wasbak met krane in die vorm van oopmondslange en maak sy oë toe . . .

Hy gly met 'n dofverligte straataf. Die geboue aan weerskante van hom het hoë houtgewels; hulle lyk soos gemmerbroodhuise.

Hy beweeg nader aan een, sien dan die blankheid van sy hand met die lang vingers teen die deur. Hy klop. Hy voel die opwinding in hom opbou . . .

Die deur gaan oop: 'n laggende vrou staan daar. Haar gesig val toe sy in Harry se gesig kyk, die vrolikheid is weg, dit word vervang deur angs . . .

"Gregorovitch?" sê 'n hoë, koue stem.

Sy skud haar kop: sy probeer om die deur toe te maak. 'n Bleek hand hou dit vas en keer dat sy hom uitsluit . . .

"Ek soek na Gregorovitch."

"Er wohnt hier nicht mehr!" roep sy uit terwyl sy haar kop skud. "Hy nie woon hier! Hy nie woon hier! Ek nie ken hom!"

Sy probeer nie meer die deur toemaak nie, sy retireer by die donker portaal in en Harry volg; hy sweef op haar af en sy hand met die lang vingers hou sy towerstaf vas.

"Waar is hy?"

"*Das weiss ich nicht!* Hy trek! Ek nie weet, ek nie weet!"

Hy lig sy towerstaf. Sy skree. Twee jong kinders kom by die portaal ingehardloop. Sy probeer hulle met haar arms beskerm. Daar flits 'n groen lig –

"Harry! HARRY!"

Hy maak sy oë oop; hy het op die vloer neergesak. Hermione hamer weer aan die deur.

"Harry, maak oop!"

Hy het geskree, hy weet dit. Hy staan op en maak die deur oop; Hermione steier dadelik binnetoe, herwin haar balans en kyk agterdogtig rond. Ron is reg agter haar en lyk ontsenu terwyl hy sy towerstaf na die hoeke van die koue badkamer mik.

"Waarmee was jy besig?" vra Hermione streng.

"Waarmee dink jy was ek besig?" vra Harry met halfhartige bravade.

"Jy't soos 'n bestene gegil!" sê Ron.

"O ja . . . Ek moet aan die slaap geraak het of –"

"Harry, moet asseblief nie ons intelligensie beledig nie," sê Hermione terwyl sy diep asemhaal. "Ons weet jou litteken het daar onder begin pyn, en jy's so wit soos 'n laken."

Harry gaan sit op die rand van die bad.

"Oukei. Ek het nou net gesien hoe vermoor Voldemort 'n vrou. Teen hierdie tyd het hy seker al haar hele gesin vermoor. En dit was nie nodig nie. Dit was weer soos met Cedric; hulle was net *daar* . . ."

"Harry, jy's nie veronderstel om dit meer te laat gebeur nie!" roep Hermione uit en haar stem eggo deur die badkamer. "Dumbledore wou hê jy moet Okklumensie gebruik! Hy het gedink die verbintenis is gevaarlik – Voldemort kan dit *gebruik*, Harry! Wat help dit jy kyk hoe hy mense doodmaak en martel; watse doel dien dit?"

"Dit beteken ek weet wat hy doen," sê Harry.

"So jy gaan nie eens *probeer* om hom uit te sluit nie?"

"Hermione, ek kan nie. Jy weet hoe vrot is ek met Okklumensie; ek kon dit nooit onder die knie kry nie."

"Jy't nooit regtig probeer nie!" sê sy vurig. "Ek verstaan dit nie, Harry – *hou* jy van hierdie spesiale verbintenis of verhouding of wat – wat ook al –?"

Sy begin stamel as sy sien hoe hy haar aankyk terwyl hy opstaan.

"Hou daarvan?" sê hy sag. "Sal *jy* daarvan hou?"

"Ek – nee – ek's jammer, Harry, ek het nie bedoel –"

"Ek haat dit, ek haat die feit dat hy binne-in my kan kom, dat ek hom moet dophou wanneer hy op sy gevaarlikste is. Maar ek gaan dit gebruik."

"Dumbledore –"

"Vergeet van Dumbledore. Dit is my keuse, niemand anders s'n nie. Ek wil weet hoekom hy agter Gregorovitch aan is."

"Wie's dit?"

"'n Oorsese towerstafmaker," sê Harry. "Hy het Krum se towerstaf gemaak en Krum reken hy's briljant."

"Maar volgens jou," sê Ron, "hou Voldemort Ollivander iewers opgesluit. As hy al klaar 'n towerstafmaker het, waarvoor het hy nog een nodig?"

"Miskien stem hy saam met Krum, miskien dink hy Gregorovitch is beter . . . of anders dink hy Gregorovitch sal kan verduidelik wat my towerstaf gedoen het toe hy my gejaag het, want Ollivander het nie geweet nie."

Harry loer in die gekraakte, stowwerige spieël en sien hoe Ron en Hermione agter sy rug skepties na mekaar kyk.

"Harry, jy hou aan praat van wat jou towerstaf gedoen het," sê Hermione, "maar *jy* het dit laat gebeur! Hoekom is jy so vasberade om nie verantwoordelikheid vir jou eie mag te neem nie?"

"Want ek weet dit was nie ek nie! En Voldemort weet dit ook, Hermione! Ons albei weet wat regtig gebeur het!"

Hulle gluur mekaar aan. Harry weet hy het Hermione nie oortuig nie en dat sy besig is om teenargumente gereed te kry vir sy teorie oor sy towerstaf sowel as die feit dat hy homself toelaat om in Voldemort se kop in te sien. Tot sy verligting kom Ron tussenbeide.

"Los dit," sê hy vir haar. "Dis sy besluit. En as ons môre na die Ministerie toe gaan, beter ons nou die plan nagaan."

Die ander twee kan sien Hermione is nie lus om die saak daar te laat nie en Harry is seker sy gaan hom by die eerste die beste geleentheid weer takel. Intussen gaan hulle terug na die kelderkombuis toe waar Skepsel vir hulle bredie en strooptert bedien.

Hulle gaan laat die aand eers bed toe nadat hulle ure lank oor en oor deur hulle plan is tot hulle dit later woord vir woord vir mekaar kan opsê. Harry, wat nou in Sirius se kamer slaap, lê in die bed met sy towerstaflig gerig op die ou foto van sy pa, Sirius, Lupin en Pettigrew en mompel die plan nog tien minute lank by homself. Wanneer hy sy towerstaf se lig afsit, dink hy egter nie aan Polisouspaljas, Kotsklontjies of Towerinstandhouding se vlootblou klede nie; hy dink aan Gregorovitch die towerstafmaker en wonder hoe lank hy nog sal kan skuil as Voldemort so verbete op hom jag maak.

Dit voel of dagbreek onbehoorlik gou ná middernag kom.

"Jy lyk horribaal," groet Ron toe hy by die kamer inkom om Harry wakker te maak.

"Nie vir lank nie," sê Harry en gaap.

Hulle kry Hermione onder in die kombuis. Skepsel gee vir haar koffie en warm broodrolletjies; daar is 'n effens maniese uitdrukking

op haar gesig wat Harry herinner aan hoe sy lyk as sy vir 'n eksamen hersien.

"Klede," sê sy fluisterend en groet hulle met 'n gespanne knik terwyl sy aanhou om in haar kraletjiehandsak rond te krap, "Polisouspaljas . . . Onsigbaarheidsmantel . . . Afleidingsknallers . . . Julle moet elkeen 'n paar vat, net vir ingeval . . . Kotsklontjies, Neusbloeinougat, Verlengbare Ore . . ."

Hulle sluk hulle ontbyt haastig af en gaan dan boontoe terwyl Skepsel buig en belowe om vir hulle 'n biefstuk-en-niertjie-pastei gereed te hê wanneer hulle terugkom.

"Dankie tog vir hom," sê Ron innig. "Wie sou nou kon dink ek het drome gedroom oor hoe ek hom keelaf sny en sy kop teen die muur vasplak?"

Hulle gaan baie versigtig by die voordeur uit: hulle sien hoe 'n paar Doodseters met sakke onder die oë die huis van oorkant die mistige plein af dophou. Hermione Disappareer eers saam met Ron en kom haal Harry dan.

Ná die gewone kort rukkie van duisternis en amperse versmoring bevind Harry hom in die klein stegie waar die eerste deel van hulle plan geskeduleer is om plaas te vind. Dit is tot dusver nog verlate, afgesien van 'n paar groot vullishouers; die Ministerie se eerste werkers verskyn gewoonlik nie voor agtuur op die vroegste hier nie.

"Nou goed," sê Hermione en kyk op haar horlosie. "Sy behoort oor omtrent vyf minute hier te wees. Wanneer ek haar Bedwelm het –"

"Hermione, ons weet," sê Ron streng. "En ek dog ons is veronderstel om die deur oop te maak voor sy hier aankom?"

Hermione kreun.

"Ek het amper vergeet! Staan weg –"

Sy mik met haar towerstaf na die nooduitgang se graffiti-bekrapte deur langs hulle wat met 'n hangslot gesluit is; dit bars met 'n slag oop. Hulle het tydens hulle sorgvuldige verkenningstogte uitgevind die donker gang agter hierdie deur lei na 'n leë teater. Hermione trek die deur terug na haar om dit te laat lyk of dit nog steeds toe is.

"En nou," sê sy en draai terug na die ander twee in die stegie, "kruip ons weer onder die Mantel weg –"

"– en ons wag," maak Ron klaar en gooi dit oor Hermione se kop soos 'n doek oor 'n budjie se kou en rol sy oë vir Harry.

Skaars 'n minuut later is daar 'n ligte *plof*: 'n klein Ministerieheksie met wegstaan grys hare Appareer 'n paar voet van hulle af en knip haar oë effens in die skielike lig; die son het nou net agter 'n wolk uitgekom. Sy het egter skaars tyd om die onverwagse warmte

te geniet voor Hermione se Bedwelmspreuk haar op die bors tref en sy omval.

"Mooi so, Hermione," sê Ron wat van agter 'n houer langs die teater se deur verskyn toe Harry die Onsigbaarheidsmantel afhaal. Hulle dra die klein heksie by die donker gang in wat na die agterkant van die verhoog toe lei. Hermione pluk 'n paar hare uit die heks se kop en gooi dit in die fles modderige Polisouspaljas wat sy uit die kraletjiehandsak gehaal het. Ron krap in die heksie se handsak rond.

"Sy's Mafalda Hopkirk," sê hy terwyl hy 'n kaartjie lees wat hulle slagoffer identifiseer as 'n assistent in die Kantoor vir die Ongemagtigde Gebruik van Towerkuns. "Jy beter dit vat, Hermione, en hier is die tekenmunte."

Hy haal 'n hele paar klein goue muntstukke, almal gebosseleer met die letters M.V.T., uit die heks se beursie en gee dit vir haar aan.

Hermione drink die Polisouspaljas wat nou 'n aangename bloupers kleur het en binne sekondes staan Mafalda Hopkirk se dubbelganger voor hulle. Terwyl sy Mafalda se bril afhaal en opsit, kyk Harry op sy horlosie.

"Ons raak agter; meneer Towerinstandhouding gaan nou enige oomblik hier wees."

Hulle maak die deur vinnig agter die regte Mafalda toe; Harry en Ron gooi die Onsigbaarheidsmantel oor hulle, maar Hermione staan openlik en wag. Sekondes later is daar nog 'n *plof* en 'n klein towenaartjie wat soos 'n muishond lyk, verskyn voor hulle.

"O hallo, Mafalda."

"Hallo!" sê Hermione in 'n bewende stem. "Hoe gaan dit vandag met jou?"

"Eintlik nie te goed nie," antwoord die towenaartjie wat erg terneergedruk lyk.

Terwyl Hermione en die towenaar straat toe mik, sluip Harry en Ron al agter hulle aan.

"Ek is so jammer om te hoor jy voel nie goed nie," praat Hermione die klein towenaartjie ferm dood terwyl hy nog oor sy probleme probeer uitwei; dit is noodsaaklik om te keer dat hy by die straat uitkom. "Hier, vat vir jou 'n lekker."

"E? O, nee dankie –"

"Jy *moet* een vat!" dring Hermione aggressief aan. Die oomblik dat die Kotsklontjie aan sy tong raak, begin die klein towenaartjie so geweldig opgooi dat hy nie eens agterkom Hermione trek 'n hand vol hare bo uit sy kop nie.

"O gaats!" sê sy terwyl hy die stegie met braaksel bemors. "Miskien moet jy liewer die dag afvat!"

"Nee – nee!" Hy stik en gooi op, maar hou aan stap, al kan hy nie reguit loop nie. "Ek moet – vandag – moet gaan –"

"Maar dis belaglik!" sê Hermione verskrik. "Jy kan nie in hierdie toestand gaan werk nie – ek dink jy moet Sint Mungo toe gaan sodat hulle jou gesond kan kry!"

Die towenaar het intussen hygend op sy hande en knieë neergeval, maar hy probeer nog steeds straat toe kruip.

"Jy kan nooit so gaan werk nie!" roep Hermione uit.

Uiteindelik lyk dit of hy haar glo. Hy trek hom sukkelend aan 'n gewalgde Hermione op die been, draai net daar om en verdwyn; al wat hy agterlaat, is die sak wat Ron uit sy hand gegryp het soos hy padgegee het en 'n paar stukkies vlieënde opgooisel.

"Jig," sê Hermione en lig haar kleed se soom op om dit uit die poeletjies braaksel te hou. "Dit sou baie minder morsig gewees het om hom ook te Bedwelm."

"Ja," sê Ron wat onder die Mantel uitkom en die towenaar se sak vashou, "maar ek dink nog steeds 'n hele hoop bewustelose lywe sou meer aandag getrek het. Die ou vat sy werk nogal ernstig op, nè? Gooi gou vir ons die hare in die Paljas."

Binne twee minute staan Ron voor hulle in die vlootblou kleed wat in die sak opgevou was, so klein en muishondagtige soos die siek towenaar.

"Snaaks dat hy dit nie vandag gedra het nie. Hy wou dan so graag gaan werk. In elk geval, volgens die etiket agterop is ek Reg Cattermole."

"Wag net hier," sê Hermione vir Harry wat nog steeds onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel is, "dan kom ons terug met hare vir jou."

Hy wag net tien minute, maar dit voel baie langer vir Harry wat alleen hier in die stegie bemors met braaksel moet wegkruip langs die deur waaragter die Bedwelmde Mafalda weggesteek is. Uiteindelik maak Ron en Hermione weer hulle opwagting.

"Ons weet nie wie hy is nie," sê Hermione terwyl sy vir Harry 'n hele paar krullerige swart hare gee, "maar hy's huis toe met 'n neus wat verskriklik bloei! Hier, hy's taamlik lank, jy sal 'n groter kleed nodig hê . . ."

Sy haal 'n pak ou klede wat Skepsel vir hulle gewas en gestryk het uit, en Harry verdwyn om die Towerdrankie te drink en te verklee.

Toe die pynlike transformasie afgehandel is, is hy langer as ses voet en te oordeel na sy gespierde arms, sterk gebou. Hy het ook 'n baard. Hy steek die Onsigbaarheidsmantel en sy bril in sy nuwe kleed weg en sluit weer by die ander twee aan.

"Dêmmit, jy maak my bang," sê Ron wat opkyk na Harry wat nou bo hom uittroon.

"Vat een van Mafalda se tekenmunte," sê Hermione vir Harry, "en kom ons waai; dis amper nege-uur."

Hulle loop saam by die stegie uit. Vyftig tree verder met die besige sypaadjie is daar swart relings met spykerpenne op aan weerskante van twee stelle trappe: die een het 'n bordjie op wat Mans sê en die ander een Dames.

"Sien julle nou-nou," sê Hermione gespanne en beweeg onseker met die trap aan die dames se kant af. Harry en Ron sluit aan by 'n paar vreemd geklede mans wat afloop na wat lyk soos 'n gewone ondergrondse openbare toilet met vuil swart en wit teëls.

"Môre, Reg!" roep 'n ander towenaar in 'n vlootblou kleed uit terwyl hy homself by 'n hokkie inlaat deur 'n goue tekenmunt by 'n gleuf in die deur in te gooi. "Blerrie pyn in die dinges hierdie, nè? Om ons almal te dwing om só by die werk te kom! Wie dink hulle gaan hier uitslaan – Harry Potter?"

Die towenaar brul van die lag vir sy eie grap. Ron grinnik geforseerd.

"Ja," sê hy, "onnosel, nè?"

En hy en Harry gaan by aangrensende hokkies in.

Links en regs van Harry is daar die geluid van spoelende water. Hy buk af en loer deur die opening aan die hokkie se onderkant, net betyds om twee gestewelde voete by die toilet langsaan te sien inklim. Hy kyk links en sien Ron vir hom knipoog.

"Moet ons ons inspoel?" fluister hy.

"Lyk so," fluister Ron terug in 'n stem wat diep en skor is.

Hulle staan albei op. Harry voel buitengewoon belaglik terwyl hy in die toilet klim.

Hy weet dadelik hy het die regte ding gedoen; al lyk dit of hy in water staan, bly sy skoene, voete en kleed kurkdroog. Hy strek na bo, trek die ketting, en die volgende oomblik zoem hy by 'n kort glygeut af en kom deur 'n kaggel in die Ministerie van Towerkuns uit.

Hy staan lomp op; sy lyf is baie groter as waaraan hy gewoond is. Die groot Atrium lyk donkerder as wat Harry dit onthou. Voorheen het 'n goue fontein die middel van die portaal gevul en glansende ligkolle oor die gepoleerde houtvloer en mure uitgestraal. Nou oorheers 'n reusagtige standbeeld van swart klip die toneel. Hierdie yslike standbeeld van 'n heks en towenaar wat op swierig gekerfde trone sit en afkyk op die Ministerie-werkers wat uit die kaggels onder hulle tuimel, is taamlik vreesaanjaend. Die woorde

TOWERKRAG IS MAG is in groot letters onderaan die standbeeld uitgegraveer.

Harry kry 'n harde hou agter teen sy bene: nog 'n towenaar het so pas by die kaggel agter hom uitgevlieg.

"Uit die pad uit; kan jy nie – o ekskuus, Runcorn!"

Duidelik bevrees maak die bles towenaar hom vinnig uit die voete. Skynbaar is Runcorn, die man wat Harry naboots, intimiderend.

"Psst!" sê 'n stem. Hy kyk om en sien hoe 'n tingerige heksie en die towenaar wat soos 'n muishond lyk en by Towerinstandhouding werk vir hom van langs die standbeeld af wink. Harry gaan sluit haastig by hulle aan.

"Het jy oukei ingekom?" fluister Hermione vir Harry.

"Nee, hy sit nog in die toilet vas," sê Ron.

"Og, baie snaaks . . . Dis aaklig, nè?" sê sy vir Harry wat na die standbeeld opkyk. "Het jy gesien waarop hulle sit?"

Harry kyk noukeuriger en besef dit wat hy gedink het dekoratief gekerfde trone is, is eintlik hope gekerfde menslike figure: honderde en honderde naakte liggame, mans, vrouens en kinders, almal met taamlik onnosel, lelike gesigte, verwronge en saamgedruk om die pragtig geklede towenaars se gewig te dra.

"Moggels," fluister Hermione. "Op hulle regmatige plekke. Kom-aan, weg is ons."

Hulle sluit aan by die stroom hekse en towenaars wat na die goue hekke aan die einde van die portaal toe beweeg en kyk so onopvallend moontlik rond, maar daar is geen teken van Dolores Umbridge se kenmerkende figuur nie. Hulle beweeg deur die hekke en in by 'n kleiner portaal waar rye vorm voor twintig goue stukke traliewerk waaragter daar ewe veel hysbakke is. Hulle het skaars by die naaste een aangesluit toe 'n stem sê: "Cattermole!"

Hulle kyk om: Harry se maag gee 'n draai. Een van die Doodseters wat by was toe Dumbledore dood is, kom na hulle toe aangestap. Die Ministerie-werkers langs hulle word stil en slaan hulle oë neer; Harry kan voel hoe die vrees deur hulle rimpel. Die man se suur, effens brutale gesig pas om die een of ander rede nie by sy manjifieke, swiepende kleed wat met baie goud geborduur is nie. Iemand uit die groep wat by die hysbakke saamdrom, roep kruiperig: "Môre, Yaxley!" Yaxley ignoreer hom.

"Cattermole, ek het gevra iemand van Towerinstandhouding moet my kantoor kom regmaak. Dit reën nog steeds daarbinne."

Ron kyk om asof hy hoop iemand anders sal ingryp, maar niemand sê 'n woord nie.

"Reën ... in jou kantoor? Dis – dis nie goed nie, is dit?"
Ron gee 'n senuweeagtige laggie. Yaxley se oë rek wyer.
"Dink jy dis snaaks, Cattermole?"
Twee hekse breek weg uit die ry vir die hysbak en maak hulle uit die voete.
"Nee," sê Ron, "nee, natuurlik nie –"
"Besef jy ek is op pad ondertoe om jou vrou te gaan ondervra, Cattermole? Ek moet sê, ek is nogal verbaas dat jy nie daar onder is om haar hand vas te hou terwyl sy wag nie. Al klaar gedink daar's geen salf aan haar te smeer nie, of hoe? Dis heel moontlik wys. Maak seker jy trou volgende keer met 'n suiwerbloed."
Hermione gee 'n geskokte gilletjie. Yaxley kyk na haar. Sy hoes flouerig en draai weg.
"Ek – ek –" stotter Ron.
"Maar as *my* vrou daarvan aangekla word dat sy 'n Modderbloed is," sê Yaxley, "– nie dat 'n vrou met wie ek trou ooit met sulke vuilgoed verwar sal word nie – en die Hoof van die Departement van Towerkrag-wetstoepassing wil 'n werkie gedoen hê, sal ek dit my prioriteit maak om dit dadelik gedoen te kry, Cattermole. Verstaan jy my?"
"Ja," fluister Ron.
"Nou maak dan werk, Cattermole, en as my kantoor nie binne 'n uur droog is nie, sal jou vrou se Bloedstatus onder selfs nog ernstiger verdenking wees as nou."
Die goue traliewerk voor hulle kletter oop. Met 'n knik en onaangename glimlag vir Harry, van wie hy duidelik verwag om waardering te hê vir hoe hy Cattermole behandel, swiep Yaxley weg na 'n ander hysbak toe. Harry, Ron en Hermione gaan by hulle s'n in, maar niemand volg hulle nie: dit is asof hulle aan 'n aansteeklike siekte ly. Die traliewerk klap kletterend toe en die hysbak begin boontoe beweeg.
"Wat gaan ek doen?" vra Ron dadelik vir die ander twee; hy lyk paniekbevange. "As ek nie opdaag nie, gaan my vrou – ek bedoel Cattermole se vrou –"
"Ons sal saam met jou kom; ons moet bymekaar bly –" begin Harry, maar Ron skud sy kop koorsagtig.
"Dis malligheid; ons het nie baie tyd nie. Kry julle twee vir Umbridge; ek gaan solank Yaxley se kantoor uitsorteer – maar hoe stop ek die reën?"
"Probeer *Finite Incantatem*," sê Hermione dadelik. "Dit behoort die reën te laat ophou as dit 'n paljas of 'n vloek is; as dit nie die geval is nie, het daar iets verkeerd gegaan met 'n Atmosferiese Tower-

spreuk, wat moeiliker sal wees om reg te maak, so probeer dan voorlopig *Impervius* om sy besittings te beskerm –"

"Sê dit weer, stadig –" sê Ron en soek desperaat in sy sakke na 'n veerpen, maar op daardie oomblik kom die hysbak sidderend tot stilstand. 'n Liggaamlose vrouestem sê: "Vlak Vier, Departement vir die Regulering en Beheer van Towerdierasies, insluitend Ondiere-, Wesens- en Geesteafdelings, Kabouterskakelkantoor en Pesadviesburo," en die traliewerk gly weer oop en laat 'n paar towenaars in, asook verskeie bleekpers papiervliegtuigies wat om die lamp in die hysbak se plafon rondfladder.

"Môre, Albert," sê 'n man met welige wangbaarde en glimlag vir Harry. Hy kyk vlugtig na Ron en Hermione toe die hysbak weer krakend boontoe begin beweeg; Hermione fluister nou desperate instruksies vir Ron. Die towenaar leun oor na Harry, gryns en mompel: "Dirk Creswell, nè? Van Kabouterskakel? Goeie werk, Albert. Ek is vol vertroue dat ek nou sy pos gaan kry!"

Hy knipoog. Harry glimlag terug en hoop dit sal genoeg wees. Die hysbak stop en die traliewerk gaan weer oop.

"Vlak Twee, Departement van Towerwetstoepassing, insluitend die Kantoor vir die Misbruik van Towerkuns, Auror-Hoofkwartier en Administrasiediens vir die Towenaarshoërhof," sê die liggaamlose heks se stem.

Harry sien hoe gee Hermione vir Ron 'n stampie en hy haas hom by die hysbak uit, gevolg deur die ander towenaars, sodat net Harry en Hermione agterbly. Die oomblik dat die goue deur toegaan, sê Hermione baie vinnig: "Weet jy, Harry, ek dink ek moet liewer agter hom aangaan. Ek dink nie hy weet wat hy doen nie en as hy gevang word, gaan die hele ding –"

"Vlak Een, Minister van Towerkuns en Steundienste."

Die goue traliewerk gly oop en Hermione snak na asem. Vier mense staan voor hulle, twee van hulle diep in gesprek: 'n towenaar met lang hare wat 'n manjifieke swart-en-goue kleed dra en 'n gesette, padda-agtige heks wat 'n fluweelstrik in haar kort hare het en 'n knyperbord teen haar bors vasklem.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



THE MUGGLE-BORN REGISTRATION COMMISSION

Ah, Mafalda!” said Umbridge, looking at Hermione. “Travers sent you, did he?”

“Y-yes,” squeaked Hermione.

“Good, you’ll do perfectly well.” Umbridge spoke to the wizard in black and gold. “That’s that problem solved, Minister, if Mafalda can be spared for record-keeping we shall be able to start straightaway.” She consulted her clipboard. “Ten people today and one of them the wife of a Ministry employee! Tut, tut . . . even here, in the heart of the Ministry!” She stepped into the lift beside Hermione, as did the two wizards who had been listening to Umbridge’s conversation with the Minister. “We’ll go straight down, Mafalda, you’ll find everything you need in the courtroom. Good morning, Albert, aren’t

you getting out?”

“Yes, of course,” said Harry in Runcorn’s deep voice.

Harry stepped out of the lift. The golden grilles clanged shut behind him. Glancing over his shoulder, Harry saw Hermione’s anxious face sinking back out of sight, a tall wizard on either side of her, Umbridge’s velvet hair-bow level with her shoulder.

“What brings you up here, Runcorn?” asked the new Minister of Magic. His long black hair and beard were streaked with silver, and a great overhanging forehead shadowed his glinting eyes, putting Harry in mind of a crab looking out from beneath a rock.

“Needed a quick word with,” Harry hesitated for a fraction of a second, “Arthur Weasley. Someone said he was up on level one.”

“Ah,” said Pius Thicknesse. “Has he been caught having contact with an Undesirable?”

“No,” said Harry, his throat dry. “No, nothing like that.”

“Ah, well. It’s only a matter of time,” said Thicknesse. “If you ask me, the blood traitors are as bad as the Mudbloods. Good day, Runcorn.”

“Good day, Minister.”

Harry watched Thicknesse march away along the thickly carpeted corridor. The moment the Minister had passed out of sight, Harry tugged the Invisibility Cloak out from under his heavy black cloak, threw it over himself, and set off along the corridor in the opposite direction. Runcorn was so tall that Harry was forced to stoop to make sure his big feet were hidden.

Panic pulsed in the pit of his stomach. As he passed gleaming wooden door after gleaming wooden door, each bearing a small

plaque with the owner's name and occupation upon it, the might of the Ministry, its complexity, its impenetrability, seemed to force itself upon him so that the plan he had been carefully concocting with Ron and Hermione over the past four weeks seemed laughably childish. They had concentrated all their efforts on getting inside without being detected: They had not given a moment's thought to what they would do if they were forced to separate. Now Hermione was stuck in court proceedings, which would undoubtedly last hours; Ron was struggling to do magic that Harry was sure was beyond him, a woman's liberty possibly depending on the outcome; and he, Harry, was wandering around on the top floor when he knew perfectly well that his quarry had just gone down in the lift.

He stopped walking, leaned against a wall, and tried to decide what to do. The silence pressed upon him: There was no bustling or talk or swift footsteps here; the purple-carpeted corridors were as hushed as though the *Muffliato* charm had been cast over the place.

Her office must be up here, Harry thought.

It seemed most unlikely that Umbridge would keep her jewelry in her office, but on the other hand it seemed foolish not to search it to make sure. He therefore set off along the corridor again, passing nobody but a frowning wizard who was murmuring instructions to a quill that floated in front of him, scribbling on a trail of parchment.

Now paying attention to the names on the doors, Harry turned a corner. Halfway along the next corridor he emerged into a wide, open space where a dozen witches and wizards sat in rows at small desks not unlike school desks, though much more highly polished and free from graffiti. Harry paused to watch them, for the effect was

quite mesmerizing. They were all waving and twiddling their wands in unison, and squares of colored paper were flying in every direction like little pink kites. After a few seconds, Harry realized that there was a rhythm to the proceedings, that the papers all formed the same pattern; and after a few more seconds he realized that what he was watching was the creation of pamphlets — that the paper squares were pages, which, when assembled, folded, and magicked into place, fell into neat stacks beside each witch or wizard.

Harry crept closer, although the workers were so intent on what they were doing that he doubted they would notice a carpet-muffled footstep, and he slid a completed pamphlet from the pile beside a young witch. He examined it beneath the Invisibility Cloak. Its pink cover was emblazoned with a golden title:

MUDBLOODS

and the Dangers They Pose to

a Peaceful Pure-Blood Society

Beneath the title was a picture of a red rose with a simpering face in the middle of its petals, being strangled by a green weed with fangs and a scowl. There was no author's name upon the pamphlet, but again, the scars on the back of his right hand seemed to tingle as he examined it. Then the young witch beside him confirmed his suspicion as she said, still waving and twirling her wand, "Will the old hag be interrogating Mudbloods all day, does anyone know?"

"Careful," said the wizard beside her, glancing around nervously; one of his pages slipped and fell to the floor.

"What, has she got magic ears as well as an eye, now?"

The witch glanced toward the shining mahogany door facing the space full of pamphlet-makers; Harry looked too, and rage reared in him like a snake. Where there might have been a peephole on a Muggle front door, a large, round eye with a bright blue iris had been set into the wood — an eye that was shockingly familiar to anybody who had known Alastor Moody.

For a split second Harry forgot where he was and what he was doing there: He even forgot that he was invisible. He strode straight over to the door to examine the eye. It was not moving: It gazed blindly upward, frozen. The plaque beneath it read:

DOLORES UMBRIDGE

SENIOR UNDERSECRETARY TO THE MINISTER

Below that, a slightly shinier new plaque read:

HEAD OF THE MUGGLE-BORN

REGISTRATION COMMISSION

Harry looked back at the dozen pamphlet-makers: Though they were intent upon their work, he could hardly suppose that they would not notice if the door of an empty office opened in front of them. He therefore withdrew from an inner pocket an odd object with little waving legs and a rubber-bulbed horn for a body. Crouching down beneath the Cloak, he placed the Decoy Detonator on the ground.

It scuttled away at once through the legs of the witches and wizards in front of him. A few moments later, during which Harry waited with his hand upon the doorknob, there came a loud bang and

a great deal of acrid black smoke billowed from a corner. The young witch in the front row shrieked: Pink pages flew everywhere as she and her fellows jumped up, looking around for the source of the commotion. Harry turned the doorknob, stepped into Umbridge's office, and closed the door behind him.

He felt he had stepped back in time. The room was exactly like Umbridge's office at Hogwarts: Lace draperies, doilies, and dried flowers covered every available surface. The walls bore the same ornamental plates, each featuring a highly colored, beribboned kitten, gamboling and frisking with sickening cuteness. The desk was covered with a flouncy, flowered cloth. Behind Mad-Eye's eye, a telescopic attachment enabled Umbridge to spy on the workers on the other side of the door. Harry took a look through it and saw that they were all still gathered around the Decoy Detonator. He wrenched the telescope out of the door, leaving a hole behind, pulled the magical eyeball out of it, and placed it in his pocket. Then he turned to face the room again, raised his wand, and murmured, *"Accio Locket."*

Nothing happened, but he had not expected it to; no doubt Umbridge knew all about protective charms and spells. He therefore hurried behind her desk and began pulling open the drawers. He saw quills and notebooks and Spellotape; enchanted paper clips that coiled snakelike from their drawer and had to be beaten back; a fussy little lace box full of spare hair bows and clips; but no sign of a locket.

There was a filing cabinet behind the desk: Harry set to searching it. Like Filch's filing cabinets at Hogwarts, it was full of folders, each labeled with a name. It was not until Harry reached the

bottommost drawer that he saw something to distract him from his search: Mr. Weasley's file.

He pulled it out and opened it.

ARTHUR WEASLEY

BLOOD STATUS:	Pureblood, but with unacceptable pro-Muggle leanings. Known member of the Order of the Phoenix.
FAMILY:	Wife (pureblood), seven children, two youngest at Hogwarts. NB: Youngest son currently at home, seriously ill, Ministry inspectors have confirmed.
SECURITY STATUS:	TRACKED. All movements are being monitored. Strong likelihood Undesirable No. 1 will contact (has stayed with Weasley family previously)

"Undesirable Number One," Harry muttered under his breath as he replaced Mr. Weasley's folder and shut the drawer. He had an idea he knew who that was, and sure enough, as he straightened up and glanced around the office for fresh hiding places, he saw a poster of himself on the wall, with the words UNDESIRABLE NO. 1 emblazoned across his chest. A little pink note was stuck to it with a picture of a kitten in the corner. Harry moved across to read it and saw that Umbridge had written, *"To be punished."*

Angrier than ever, he proceeded to grope in the bottoms of the vases and baskets of dried flowers, but was not at all surprised that the locket was not there. He gave the office one last sweeping look,

and his heart skipped a beat. Dumbledore was staring at him from a small rectangular mirror, propped up on a bookcase beside the desk.

Harry crossed the room at a run and snatched it up, but realized the moment he touched it that it was not a mirror at all. Dumbledore was smiling wistfully out of the front cover of a glossy book. Harry had not immediately noticed the curly green writing across his hat — *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore* — nor the slightly smaller writing across his chest: "by Rita Skeeter, bestselling author of *Armando Dippet: Master or Moron?*"

Harry opened the book at random and saw a full-page photograph of two teenage boys, both laughing immoderately with their arms around each other's shoulders. Dumbledore, now with elbow-length hair, had grown a tiny wispy beard that recalled the one on Krum's chin that had so annoyed Ron. The boy who roared in silent amusement beside Dumbledore had a gleeful, wild look about him. His golden hair fell in curls to his shoulders. Harry wondered whether it was a young Doge, but before he could check the caption, the door of the office opened.

If Thicknesse had not been looking over his shoulder as he entered, Harry would not have had time to pull the Invisibility Cloak over himself. As it was, he thought Thicknesse might have caught a glimpse of movement, because for a moment or two he remained quite still, staring curiously at the place where Harry had just vanished. Perhaps deciding that all he had seen was Dumbledore scratching his nose on the front of the book, for Harry had hastily replaced it upon the shelf, Thicknesse finally walked to the desk and pointed his wand at the quill standing ready in the ink pot. It sprang

out and began scribbling a note to Umbridge. Very slowly, hardly daring to breathe, Harry backed out of the office into the open area beyond.

The pamphlet-makers were still clustered around the remains of the Decoy Detonator, which continued to hoot feebly as it smoked. Harry hurried off up the corridor as the young witch said, "I bet it sneaked up here from Experimental Charms, they're so careless, remember that poisonous duck?"

Speeding back toward the lifts, Harry reviewed his options. It had never been likely that the locket was here at the Ministry, and there was no hope of bewitching its whereabouts out of Umbridge while she was sitting in a crowded court. Their priority now had to be to leave the Ministry before they were exposed, and try again another day. The first thing to do was to find Ron, and then they could work out a way of extracting Hermione from the courtroom.

The lift was empty when it arrived. Harry jumped in and pulled off the Invisibility Cloak as it started its descent. To his enormous relief, when it rattled to a halt at level two, a soaking-wet and wild-eyed Ron got in.

"M-morning," he stammered to Harry as the lift set off again.

"Ron, it's me, Harry!"

"Harry! Blimey, I forgot what you looked like — why isn't Hermione with you?"

"She had to go down to the courtrooms with Umbridge, she couldn't refuse, and —"

But before Harry could finish the lift had stopped again: The doors opened and Mr. Weasley walked inside, talking to an elderly witch

whose blonde hair was teased so high it resembled an anthill.

". . . I quite understand what you're saying, Wakanda, but I'm afraid I cannot be party to —"

Mr. Weasley broke off; he had noticed Harry. It was very strange to have Mr. Weasley glare at him with that much dislike. The lift doors closed and the four of them trundled downward once more.

"Oh, hello, Reg," said Mr. Weasley, looking around at the sound of steady dripping from Ron's robes. "Isn't your wife in for questioning today? Er — what's happened to you? Why are you so wet?"

"Yaxley's office is raining," said Ron. He addressed Mr. Weasley's shoulder, and Harry felt sure he was scared that his father might recognize him if they looked directly into each other's eyes. "I couldn't stop it, so they've sent me to get Bernie — Pillsworth, I think they said —"

"Yes, a lot of offices have been raining lately," said Mr. Weasley. "Did you try Meteolojinx Recanto? It worked for Bletchley."

"Meteolojinx Recanto?" whispered Ron. "No, I didn't. Thanks, D — I mean, thanks, Arthur."

The lift doors opened; the old witch with the anthill hair left, and Ron darted past her out of sight. Harry made to follow him, but found his path blocked as Percy Weasley strode into the lift, his nose buried in some papers he was reading.

Not until the doors had clanged shut again did Percy realize he was in a lift with his father. He glanced up, saw Mr. Weasley, turned radish red, and left the lift the moment the doors opened again. For the second time, Harry tried to get out, but this time found his way blocked by Mr. Weasley's arm.

"One moment, Runcorn."

The lift doors closed and as they clanked down another floor, Mr. Weasley said, "I hear you laid information about Dirk Cresswell."

Harry had the impression that Mr. Weasley's anger was no less because of the brush with Percy. He decided his best chance was to act stupid.

"Sorry?" he said.

"Don't pretend, Runcorn," said Mr. Weasley fiercely. "You tracked down the wizard who faked his family tree, didn't you?"

"I — so what if I did?" said Harry.

"So Dirk Cresswell is ten times the wizard you are," said Mr. Weasley quietly, as the lift sank ever lower. "And if he survives Azkaban, you'll have to answer to him, not to mention his wife, his sons, and his friends —"

"Arthur," Harry interrupted, "you know you're being tracked, don't you?"

"Is that a threat, Runcorn?" said Mr. Weasley loudly.

"No," said Harry, "it's a fact! They're watching your every move —"

The lift doors opened. They had reached the Atrium. Mr. Weasley gave Harry a scathing look and swept from the lift. Harry stood there, shaken. He wished he was impersonating somebody other than Runcorn. . . . The lift doors clanged shut.

Harry pulled out the Invisibility Cloak and put it back on. He would try to extricate Hermione on his own while Ron was dealing with the raining office. When the doors opened, he stepped out into a torch-lit stone passageway quite different from the wood-paneled and

carpeted corridors above. As the lift rattled away again, Harry shivered slightly, looking toward the distant black door that marked the entrance to the Department of Mysteries.

He set off, his destination not the black door, but the doorway he remembered on the left-hand side, which opened onto the flight of stairs down to the court chambers. His mind grappled with possibilities as he crept down them: He still had a couple of Decoy Detonators, but perhaps it would be better to simply knock on the courtroom door, enter as Runcorn, and ask for a quick word with Mafalda? Of course, he did not know whether Runcorn was sufficiently important to get away with this, and even if he managed it, Hermione's non-reappearance might trigger a search before they were clear of the Ministry. . . .

Lost in thought, he did not immediately register the unnatural chill that was creeping over him, as if he were descending into fog. It was becoming colder and colder with every step he took: a cold that reached right down into his throat and tore at his lungs. And then he felt that stealing sense of despair, of hopelessness, filling him, expanding inside him. . . .

Dementors, he thought.

And as he reached the foot of the stairs and turned to his right he saw a dreadful scene. The dark passage outside the courtrooms was packed with tall, black-hooded figures, their faces completely hidden, their ragged breathing the only sound in the place. The petrified Muggle-borns brought in for questioning sat huddled and shivering on hard wooden benches. Most of them were hiding their faces in their hands, perhaps in an instinctive attempt to shield

themselves from the dementors' greedy mouths. Some were accompanied by families, others sat alone. The dementors were gliding up and down in front of them, and the cold, and the hopelessness, and the despair of the place laid themselves upon Harry like a curse. . . .

Fight it, he told himself, but he knew that he could not conjure a Patronus here without revealing himself instantly. So he moved forward as silently as he could, and with every step he took numbness seemed to steal over his brain, but he forced himself to think of Hermione and of Ron, who needed him.

Moving through the towering black figures was terrifying: The eyeless faces hidden beneath their hoods turned as he passed, and he felt sure that they sensed him, sensed, perhaps, a human presence that still had some hope, some resilience. . . .

And then, abruptly and shockingly amid the frozen silence, one of the dungeon doors on the left of the corridor was flung open and screams echoed out of it.

"No, no, I'm half-blood, I'm half-blood, I tell you! My father was a wizard, he *was,* look him up, Arkie Alderton, he's a well-known broomstick designer, look him up, I tell you — get your hands off me, get your hands off —"

"This is your final warning," said Umbridge's soft voice, magically magnified so that it sounded clearly over the man's desperate screams. "If you struggle, you will be subjected to the Dementor's Kiss."

The man's screams subsided, but dry sobs echoed through the corridor.

“Take him away,” said Umbridge.

Two dementors appeared in the doorway of the courtroom, their rotting, scabbed hands clutching the upper arms of a wizard who appeared to be fainting. They glided away down the corridor with him, and the darkness they trailed behind them swallowed him from sight.

“Next — Mary Cattermole,” called Umbridge.

A small woman stood up; she was trembling from head to foot. Her dark hair was smoothed back into a bun and she wore long, plain robes. Her face was completely bloodless. As she passed the dementors, Harry saw her shudder.

He did it instinctively, without any sort of plan, because he hated the sight of her walking alone into the dungeon: As the door began to swing closed, he slipped into the courtroom behind her.

It was not the same room in which he had once been interrogated for improper use of magic. This one was much smaller, though the ceiling was quite as high; it gave the claustrophobic sense of being stuck at the bottom of a deep well.

There were more dementors in here, casting their freezing aura over the place; they stood like faceless sentinels in the corners farthest from the high, raised platform. Here, behind a balustrade, sat Umbridge, with Yaxley on one side of her, and Hermione, quite as white-faced as Mrs. Cattermole, on the other. At the foot of the platform, a bright-silver, long-haired cat prowled up and down, up and down, and Harry realized that it was there to protect the prosecutors from the despair that emanated from the dementors: That was for the accused to feel, not the accusers.

"Sit down," said Umbridge in her soft, silky voice.

Mrs. Cattermole stumbled to the single seat in the middle of the floor beneath the raised platform. The moment she had sat down, chains clinked out of the arms of the chair and bound her there.

"You are Mary Elizabeth Cattermole?" asked Umbridge.

Mrs. Cattermole gave a single, shaky nod.

"Married to Reginald Cattermole of the Magical Maintenance Department?"

Mrs. Cattermole burst into tears.

"I don't know where he is, he was supposed to meet me here!"

Umbridge ignored her.

"Mother to Maisie, Ellie, and Alfred Cattermole?"

Mrs. Cattermole sobbed harder than ever.

"They're frightened, they think I might not come home —"

"Spare us," spat Yaxley. "The brats of Mudbloods do not stir our sympathies."

Mrs. Cattermole's sobs masked Harry's footsteps as he made his way carefully toward the steps that led up to the raised platform. The moment he had passed the place where the Patronus cat patrolled, he felt the change in temperature: It was warm and comfortable here. The Patronus, he was sure, was Umbridge's, and it glowed brightly because she was so happy here, in her element, upholding the twisted laws she had helped to write. Slowly and very carefully he edged his way along the platform behind Umbridge, Yaxley, and Hermione, taking a seat behind the latter. He was worried about making Hermione jump. He thought of casting the *Muffliato* charm upon Umbridge and Yaxley, but even murmuring the word might cause

Hermione alarm. Then Umbridge raised her voice to address Mrs. Cattermole, and Harry seized his chance.

"I'm behind you," he whispered into Hermione's ear.

As he had expected, she jumped so violently she nearly overturned the bottle of ink with which she was supposed to be recording the interview, but both Umbridge and Yaxley were concentrating upon Mrs. Cattermole, and this went unnoticed.

"A wand was taken from you upon your arrival at the Ministry today, Mrs. Cattermole," Umbridge was saying. "Eight-and-three-quarter inches, cherry, unicorn-hair core. Do you recognize that description?"

Mrs. Cattermole nodded, mopping her eyes on her sleeve.

"Could you please tell us from which witch or wizard you took that wand?"

"T-took?" sobbed Mrs. Cattermole. "I didn't t-take it from anybody. I b-bought it when I was eleven years old. It — it — it — *chose* me."

She cried harder than ever.

Umbridge laughed a soft girlish laugh that made Harry want to attack her. She leaned forward over the barrier, the better to observe her victim, and something gold swung forward too, and dangled over the void: the locket.

Hermione had seen it; she let out a little squeak, but Umbridge and Yaxley, still intent upon their prey, were deaf to everything else.

"No," said Umbridge, "no, I don't think so, Mrs. Cattermole. Wands only choose witches or wizards. You are not a witch. I have your responses to the questionnaire that was sent to you here —

Mafalda, pass them to me."

Umbridge held out a small hand: She looked so toadlike at that moment that Harry was quite surprised not to see webs between the stubby fingers. Hermione's hands were shaking with shock. She fumbled in a pile of documents balanced on the chair beside her, finally withdrawing a sheaf of parchment with Mrs. Cattermole's name on it.

"That's — that's pretty, Dolores," she said, pointing at the pendant gleaming in the ruffled folds of Umbridge's blouse.

"What?" snapped Umbridge, glancing down. "Oh yes — an old family heirloom," she said, patting the locket lying on her large bosom. "The *S* stands for Selwyn. . . . I am related to the Selwyns. . . . Indeed, there are few pure-blood families to whom I am not related. . . . A pity," she continued in a louder voice, flicking through Mrs. Cattermole's questionnaire, "that the same cannot be said for you. '*Parents' professions: greengrocers.*'"

Yaxley laughed jeeringly. Below, the fluffy silver cat patrolled up and down, and the dementors stood waiting in the corners.

It was Umbridge's lie that brought the blood surging into Harry's brain and obliterated his sense of caution — that the locket she had taken as a bribe from a petty criminal was being used to bolster her own pure-blood credentials. He raised his wand, not even troubling to keep it concealed beneath the Invisibility Cloak, and said, "*Stupefy!*"

There was a flash of red light; Umbridge crumpled and her forehead hit the edge of the balustrade: Mrs. Cattermole's papers slid off her lap onto the floor and, down below, the prowling silver cat

vanished. Ice-cold air hit them like an oncoming wind: Yaxley, confused, looked around for the source of the trouble and saw Harry's disembodied hand and wand pointing at him. He tried to draw his own wand, but too late: *"Stupefy!"*

Yaxley slid to the ground to lie curled on the floor.

"Harry!"

"Hermione, if you think I was going to sit here and let her pretend —"

"Harry, Mrs. Cattermole!"

Harry whirled around, throwing off the Invisibility Cloak; down below, the dementors had moved out of their corners; they were gliding toward the woman chained to the chair: Whether because the Patronus had vanished or because they sensed that their masters were no longer in control, they seemed to have abandoned restraint. Mrs. Cattermole let out a terrible scream of fear as a slimy, scabbed hand grasped her chin and forced her face back.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

The silver stag soared from the tip of Harry's wand and leaped toward the dementors, which fell back and melted into the dark shadows again. The stag's light, more powerful and more warming than the cat's protection, filled the whole dungeon as it cantered around and around the room.

"Get the Horcrux," Harry told Hermione.

He ran back down the steps, stuffing the Invisibility Cloak back into his bag, and approached Mrs. Cattermole.

"You?" she whispered, gazing into his face. "But — but Reg said you were the one who submitted my name for questioning!"

"Did I?" muttered Harry, tugging at the chains binding her arms. "Well, I've had a change of heart. *Diffindo!*" Nothing happened. "Hermione, how do I get rid of these chains?"

"Wait, I'm trying something up here —"

"Hermione, we're surrounded by dementors!"

"I know that, Harry, but if she wakes up and the locket's gone — I need to duplicate it — *Geminio!* There . . . That should fool her. . . ."

Hermione came running downstairs.

"Let's see. . . . *Relashio!*"

The chains clinked and withdrew into the arms of the chair. Mrs. Cattermole looked just as frightened as ever before.

"I don't understand," she whispered.

"You're going to leave here with us," said Harry, pulling her to her feet. "Go home, grab your children, and get out, get out of the country if you've got to. Disguise yourselves and run. You've seen how it is, you won't get anything like a fair hearing here."

"Harry," said Hermione, "how are we going to get out of here with all those dementors outside the door?"

"Patronuses," said Harry, pointing his wand at his own: The stag slowed and walked, still gleaming brightly, toward the door. "As many as we can muster; do yours, Hermione."

"Expec — Expecto patronum," said Hermione. Nothing happened.

"It's the only spell she ever has trouble with," Harry told a completely bemused Mrs. Cattermole. "Bit unfortunate, really . . . Come on, Hermione. . . ."

"Expecto patronum!"

A silver otter burst from the end of Hermione's wand and swam gracefully through the air to join the stag.

"C'mon," said Harry, and he led Hermione and Mrs. Cattermole to the door.

When the Patronuses glided out of the dungeon there were cries of shock from the people waiting outside. Harry looked around; the dementors were falling back on both sides of them, melding into the darkness, scattering before the silver creatures.

"It's been decided that you should all go home and go into hiding with your families," Harry told the waiting Muggle-borns, who were dazzled by the light of the Patronuses and still cowering slightly. "Go abroad if you can. Just get well away from the Ministry. That's the — er — new official position. Now, if you'll just follow the Patronuses, you'll be able to leave from the Atrium."

They managed to get up the stone steps without being intercepted, but as they approached the lifts Harry started to have misgivings. If they emerged into the Atrium with a silver stag, an otter soaring alongside it, and twenty or so people, half of them accused Muggle-borns, he could not help feeling that they would attract unwanted attention. He had just reached this unwelcome conclusion when the lift clanged to a halt in front of them.

"Reg!" screamed Mrs. Cattermole, and she threw herself into Ron's arms. "Runcorn let me out, he attacked Umbridge and Yaxley, and he's told all of us to leave the country, I think we'd better do it, Reg, I really do, let's hurry home and fetch the children and — why are you so wet?"

"Water," muttered Ron, disengaging himself. "Harry, they know

there are intruders inside the Ministry, something about a hole in Umbridge's office door, I reckon we've got five minutes if that —"

Hermione's Patronus vanished with a *pop* as she turned a horror-struck face to Harry.

"Harry, if we're trapped here — !"

"We won't be if we move fast," said Harry. He addressed the silent group behind them, who were all gawping at him.

"Who's got wands?"

About half of them raised their hands.

"Okay, all of you who haven't got wands need to attach yourself to somebody who has. We'll need to be fast before they stop us. Come on."

They managed to cram themselves into two lifts. Harry's Patronus stood sentinel before the golden grilles as they shut and the lifts began to rise.

"Level eight," said the witch's cool voice, "Atrium."

Harry knew at once that they were in trouble. The Atrium was full of people moving from fireplace to fireplace, sealing them off.

"Harry!" squeaked Hermione. "What are we going to — ?"

"STOP!" Harry thundered, and the powerful voice of Runcorn echoed through the Atrium: The wizards sealing the fireplaces froze. "Follow me," he whispered to the group of terrified Muggle-borns, who moved forward in a huddle, shepherded by Ron and Hermione.

"What's up, Albert?" said the same balding wizard who had followed Harry out of the fireplace earlier. He looked nervous.

"This lot need to leave before you seal the exits," said Harry with all the authority he could muster.

The group of wizards in front of him looked at one another.

"We've been told to seal all exits and not let anyone —"

"Are you contradicting me?" Harry blustered. "Would you like me to have your family tree examined, like I had Dirk Cresswell's?"

"Sorry!" gasped the balding wizard, backing away. "I didn't mean nothing, Albert, but I thought . . . I thought they were in for questioning and . . ."

"Their blood is pure," said Harry, and his deep voice echoed impressively through the hall. "Purer than many of yours, I daresay. Off you go," he boomed to the Muggle-borns, who scurried forward into the fireplaces and began to vanish in pairs. The Ministry wizards hung back, some looking confused, others scared and resentful. Then:

"Mary!"

Mrs. Cattermole looked over her shoulder. The real Reg Cattermole, no longer vomiting but pale and wan, had just come running out of a lift.

"R-Reg?"

She looked from her husband to Ron, who swore loudly.

The balding wizard gaped, his head turning ludicrously from one Reg Cattermole to the other.

"Hey — what's going on? What is this?"

"Seal the exit! SEAL IT!"

Yaxley had burst out of another lift and was running toward the group beside the fireplaces, into which all of the Muggle-borns but Mrs. Cattermole had now vanished. As the balding wizard lifted his wand, Harry raised an enormous fist and punched him, sending him flying through the air.

“He’s been helping Muggle-borns escape, Yaxley!” Harry shouted.

The balding wizard’s colleagues set up an uproar, under cover of which Ron grabbed Mrs. Cattermole, pulled her into the still-open fireplace, and disappeared. Confused, Yaxley looked from Harry to the punched wizard, while the real Reg Cattermole screamed, “My wife! Who was that with my wife? What’s going on?”

Harry saw Yaxley’s head turn, saw an inkling of the truth dawn in that brutish face.

“Come on!” Harry shouted at Hermione; he seized her hand and they jumped into the fireplace together as Yaxley’s curse sailed over Harry’s head. They spun for a few seconds before shooting up out of a toilet into a cubicle. Harry flung open the door; Ron was standing there beside the sinks, still wrestling with Mrs. Cattermole.

“Reg, I don’t understand —”

“Let go, I’m not your husband, you’ve got to go home!”

There was a noise in the cubicle behind them; Harry looked around; Yaxley had just appeared.

“LET’S GO!” Harry yelled. He seized Hermione by the hand and Ron by the arm and turned on the spot.

Darkness engulfed them, along with the sensation of compressing bands, but something was wrong. . . . Hermione’s hand seemed to be sliding out of his grip. . . .

He wondered whether he was going to suffocate; he could not breathe or see and the only solid things in the world were Ron’s arm and Hermione’s fingers, which were slowly slipping away. . . .

And then he saw the door of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, with its serpent door knocker, but before he could draw breath, there

was a scream and a flash of purple light; Hermione's hand was suddenly vicelike upon his and everything went dark again.

Die Registrasiekommissie vir Moggelgeborenes

"A, Mafalda!" sê Umbridge en kyk na Hermione. "Travers het jou seker gestuur?"

"J – ja," piep Hermione.

"Goed so, jy sal goed genoeg wees." Umbridge praat met die towenaar in swart-en-goud. "Dan is die probleem opgelos, Minister. As Mafalda aan rekordhouding afgestaan kan word, kan ons onmiddellik begin." Sy raadpleeg haar knyperbord. "Tien mense vandag en een van hulle is 'n Ministerie-werker se vrou! Ai tog . . . selfs hier, in die hart van die Ministerie!" Sy klim saam met die twee towenaars wat na Umbridge se gesprek met die Minister geluister het in die hysbak en kom staan langs Hermione. "Ons gaan sommer reguit af ondertoe, Mafalda; jy sal alles wat jy benodig onder in die hofsaal kry. Goeiemôre, Albert, gaan jy nie uitklim nie?"

"Ja, natuurlik," sê Harry in Runcorn se diep stem.

Harry stap uit en die hysbak se goue traliewerk klap agter hom toe. Hy kyk oor sy skouer en sien hoe Hermione se angstige gesig wegsink en verdwyn; daar staan 'n lang towenaar aan weerskante van haar en Umbridge se fluweelhaarstrik is gelyk met haar skouer.

"Wat bring jou hierheen, Runcorn?" vra die nuwe Minister van Towerkuns. Sy lang swart hare en baard het strepe silwer in; 'n groot, bultende voorkop gooi 'n skaduwee oor sy blink oë en laat Harry dink aan 'n krap wat onder 'n rots uitloer.

"Ek wou net vinnig kom gesels met," Harry huiwer vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde, "Arthur Weasley. Iemand het gesê hy's hier bo op Vlak Een."

"A," sê Pius Thicknesse. "Is hy betrap dat hy kontak met 'n Ongewenste gehad het?"

"Nee," sê Harry met 'n droë keel. "Nee, niks van daardie aard nie."

"O wel, dis net 'n kwessie van tyd," sê Thicknesse. "As jy my vra, is die bloedverraaiers so erg soos die Modderbloede. Goeiedag, Runcorn."

"Goeiedag, Minister."

Harry kyk hoe Thicknesse in die gang met die dik tapyt af marsjeer. Die oomblik dat die Minister uit die oog is, trek Harry die Onsigbaarheidsmantel onder sy swaar swart kleed uit, gooi dit oor hom en mik in die teenoorgestelde rigting met die gang af. Runcorn is so lank dat Harry krom moet loop om seker te maak sy groot voete is onsigbaar.

Paniek pols in die krop van sy maag. Soos hy verby glansende houtdeur na glansende houtdeur loop, elkeen met 'n klein plaatjie met die amptenaar se naam en beroep daarop, is dit asof die Ministerie se mag, sy kompleksiteit, sy ondeurdringbaarheid, aan hom opgedwing word dat die plan wat hy die afgelope vier weke so noukeurig saam met Ron en Hermione uitgedink het, lagwekkend kinderagtig voel. Hulle het net gekonsentreer op hoe om ongesiens hier in te kom: hulle het nie vir 'n oomblik gedink aan wat om te doen as hulle gedwing sou word om uitmekaar te gaan nie. Nou sit Hermione vas in hofverrigtinge wat ongetwyfeld ure lank gaan duur, Ron sukkel om towerkrag te gebruik wat Harry seker is bo sy vuurmaakplek is en 'n vrou se vryheid hang moontlik van die resultaat daarvan af, en hy wat Harry is, dwaal rond op die boonste verdieping terwyl hy voor sy siel weet sy prooi is so pas met die hysbak af ondertoe.

Hy kom tot stilstand, leun teen 'n muur en probeer besluit wat om te doen. Die stilte versmoor hom: hier is daar nie 'n gewoel of gesels of vinnige voetstappe nie; die gange met die pers tapyt is so stil asof die *Muffliato*-towerspreuk oor die plek uitgespreek is.

Haar kantoor moet hier bo wees, dink Harry.

Dit voel onwaarskynlik dat Umbridge haar juweliersware in haar kantoor sal hou, maar aan die ander kant sal dit dwaas wees om dit nie te deursoek nie, net om seker te maak. Hy beweeg dus verder met die gang af; die enigste persoon wat hy teëkom, is 'n fronsende towenaar wat instruksies mompel vir 'n veerpen wat voor hom sweef en op 'n lang perkamentrol skryf.

Harry gee nou aandag aan die name op die deure en gaan om 'n draai. Halfpad met die volgende gang af kom hy uit by 'n breë, oop ruimte waar 'n dosyn hekse en towenaars in rye sit by klein lessenaars wat amper soos skoolbanke lyk, hoewel hulle baie blinker gepoets is en nie graffiti op het nie. Harry gaan staan om hulle dop te hou, want die effek is nogal hipnoties. Hulle swaai en draai hulle towerstawwe gelyk, en vierkantige stukke gekleurde papier vlieg in alle rigtings soos klein pienk vlieërs. Ná 'n paar sekondes besef Harry daar is 'n ritme in die prosedure, dat die papiere almal die-

selfde patroon vorm, en ná nog 'n paar sekondes besef hy hy kyk hoe pamflette gemaak word: die papiervierkante is bladsye en word aanmekaar gesit, gevou en in plek getoor, met netjiese hopies wat langs elke heks of towenaar opstapel.

Harry kruip nader, hoewel die werkers so verdiep is in wat hulle doen dat hy twyfel of hulle voetstappe wat deur die tapyt gedemp word, sal opmerk, en hy gaps 'n voltooide pamflet uit die hopie langs 'n jong heks. Hy bestudeer dit onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel. Op die pienk voorblad pryk daar 'n goue titel:

MODDERBLOEDE
en die Gevare wat Hulle Inhou vir 'n Vreedsame Suiwerbloedgemeenskap

Onder die titel is 'n prentjie van 'n rooi roos, met 'n stuitige gesig in die middel van sy kroonblare, wat deur 'n groen onkruid met slagtande en 'n kwaai gesig verwurg word. Daar is nie 'n skrywer se naam op die pamflet nie, maar die littekens bo-op sy regterhand begin weer eens tintel terwyl hy dit bestudeer. Dan bevestig die jong heks langs hom sy vermoede toe sy sê, terwyl sy haar towerstaf aanhou swaai en draai: "Weet iemand of die ou feeks heeldag Moggels gaan ondervra?"

"Oppas," sê die towenaar langs haar en kyk senuweeagtig om; een van sy bladsye gly en val op die vloer.

"Wat, het sy nou getoorde ore sowel as 'n oog?"

Die heks loer na die blink mahoniedeur reg oorkant die pamfletmakers se kantoor; Harry kyk ook en woede rys in hom op soos 'n slang. Waar daar in 'n Moggel voordeur miskien 'n loergaatjie sal wees, is hier 'n groot, ronde oog met 'n helderblou iris in die hout ingesit; 'n oog wat skokkend bekend sal wees vir enigiemand wat Alastor Moody geken het.

Vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde vergeet Harry waar hy is en wat hy hier doen: hy vergeet selfs dat hy onsigbaar is. Hy loop reguit na die deur toe en bekyk die oog. Dit beweeg nie: dit staar blind boontoe, gevries. Die bordjie daaronder lees:

Dolores Umbridge
Senior Ondersekretaris tot die Minister

Daaronder is 'n effens blinker nuwe bordjie wat sê:

Hoof van die vir Moggelgeborenes Registrasiekommissie

Harry kyk terug na die dosyn pamfletmakers: al is hulle so verdiep in hulle werk, is hy seker hulle sal dit agterkom as 'n leë kantoor se deur voor hulle opgaan. Daarom haal hy uit sy binnesak 'n vreemde voorwerp met klein swaaiende pootjies en 'n rubberbolhoring vir 'n lyf. Hy buk onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel en sit die Afleidingsknaller op die grond neer.

Dit hardloop dadelik tussen die hekse en towenaars voor hom se bene in. 'n Paar oomblikke later, terwyl Harry met sy hand op die deurknop wag, is daar 'n harde slag en 'n groot wolk stink swart rook borrel by 'n hoek uit. Die jong heks in die voorste ry gil: pienk bladsye vlieg oral rond soos sy en haar medewerkers opspring en omkyk na die bron van die opskudding. Harry draai die deurknop, glip by Umbridge se kantoor in en maak die deur agter hom toe.

Dit voel vir hom of hy in die verlede teruggegaan het. Die vertrek lyk presies net soos Umbridge se kantoor in Hogwarts: draperings van kant, doilies en gedroogde blomme bedek elke beskikbare oppervlak. Teen die mure hang dieselfde ornamentele borde, elkeen met 'n helderkleurige katjie met 'n strikkie wat ad nauseum oulik baljaar en bokspring. Daar is 'n geblomde valletjieskleed oor die lessenaar gegooi. Agter Maloog se oog maak 'n teleskopiese toestel dit vir Umbridge moontlik om op die werkers aan die ander kant van die deur te spioeneer. Harry loer daardeur en sien hulle almal staan nog steeds om die Afleidingsknaller. Hy pluk die teleskoop uit die deur en laat 'n gat agter, haal die getoorde oogbal daaruit en sit dit in sy sak. Dan draai hy weer na die vertrek toe, lig sy towerstaf en prewel: *"Accio hangertjie."*

Niks gebeur nie, maar hy was dit te wagte; Umbridge weet ongetwyfeld alles van beskermende paljasse en towerspreuke af. Daarom beweeg hy vinnig agter haar lessenaar in en begin die laaie ooptrek. Hy sien veerpenne en notaboeke en towerkleeflint; betowerde skuifspelde wat soos slangetjies uit die laai kronkel en teruggedruk moet word; 'n oordadig versierde boksie van kant vol ekstra haarstrikke en -knippies; maar geen teken van 'n hangertjie nie.

Daar is 'n liasseerkabinet agter die lessenaar: Harry begin daardeur soek. Net soos Filch se liasseerkabinette by Hogwarts is dit vol lêers, elkeen met 'n naam op. Eers toe Harry by die heel onderste laai kom, sien hy iets wat sy aandag van sy soektog aflei: meneer Weasley se lêer.

Hy trek dit uit en maak dit oop.

ARTHUR WEASLEY

Bloedstatus:	*Suiwerbloed, maar met onaanvaarbare pro-Moggel-neigings.* *Bekende lid van die Orde van die Feniks*
Familie:	*Vrou (suiwerbloed), sewe kinders, jongste twee in Hogwarts.* *NB: Jongste seun tans tuis, ernstig siek, Ministerie se inspekteurs het bevestig.*
Sekuriteitstatus:	*WORD DOPGEHOU. Alle bewegings word gemonitor. Sterk moontlikheid dat Ongewenste No. 1 hom sal kontak (het voorheen by Weasley-gesin gebly).*

"Ongewenste Nommer Een," prewel Harry sag terwyl hy meneer Weasley se lêer terugsit en die laai toemaak. Hy het 'n vermoede wie dit is, en inderdaad, toe hy regop kom en in die kantoor rondkyk vir ander wegsteekplekke sien hy 'n plakkaat van homself teen die muur met die woorde ONGEWENSTE NO. 1 in vet letters oor sy borskas. 'n Pienk notatjie met 'n prentjie van 'n katjie in die hoek is daarop vasgeplak. Hy beweeg nader om dit te lees en sien Umbridge het geskryf: *"Moet gestraf word"*.

Kwater as ooit begin hy onderin vase en mandjies gedroogde blomme rondvoel, maar is glad nie verbaas dat die hangertjie nie daar is nie. Hy laat sy oë nog 'n laaste keer oor die kantoor gly en dan gaan sy hart amper staan. Dumbledore staar na hom vanuit 'n klein, reghoekige spieël wat teen 'n boekrak langs die lessenaar staangemaak is.

Harry beweeg vinnig deur die vertrek en raap dit op, maar die oomblik dat hy daaraan raak, besef hy dit is glad nie 'n spieël nie. Dumbledore glimlag peinsend op die voorblad van 'n glansboek. Harry sien nou eers die gekrulde groen skrif oor sy hoed: *Die Lewe en Leuens van Albus Dumbledore* en die effens kleiner skrif oor sy borskas: *deur Rita Skeeter, skrywer van die blitsverkoper* Armando Dippet: Meester of Moroon?

Harry maak die boek lukraak oop en sien 'n volbladfoto van twee tienerseuns wat albei hartlik lag en met hulle arms om mekaar se skouers staan. Dumbledore se hare kom nou tot by sy elmboë en hy het 'n yl baardjie gekweek wat lyk soos die een op Krum se ken wat Ron so geïrriteer het. Die seun wat in stille genot langs Dumbledore skater, lyk vrolik en wild. Sy goue hare val in krulle op sy skouers. Harry wonder of dit 'n jong Doge is, maar voor hy die onderskrif kan lees, gaan die kantoor se deur oop.

As Thicknesse nie oor sy skouer gekyk het terwyl hy inkom nie,

sou Harry nie tyd gehad het om die Onsigbaarheidsmantel oor hom te gooi nie. Hy dink nogtans Thicknesse het dalk skrams 'n beweging gesien, want hy staan vir 'n oomblik of twee doodstil en staar fronsend na die plek waar Harry nou net verdwyn het. Thicknesse het skynbaar besluit al wat hy gesien het, was Dumbledore wat sy neus krap op die voorblad van die boek wat Harry haastig terug op die rak gesit het, want hy loop uiteindelik na die lessenaar toe en wys met sy towerstaf na 'n veerpen wat gereed staan in die inkpot. Dit spring uit en begin 'n nota vir Umbridge skryf. Baie stadig en amper te bang om asem te haal, retireer Harry by die kantoor uit tot in die oop ruimte buite.

Die pamfletmakers staan nog steeds saamgedrom om die oorblyfsels van die Afleidingsknaller wat aanhou om flou te toeter terwyl dit rook. Harry beweeg vinnig met die gang op terwyl die jong heks sê: "Ek wed julle dit het van Eksperimentele Towerspreuke af hiernatoe uitgeglip; hulle's so agterlosig, onthou julle daai giftige eend?"

Terwyl hy haastig terug na die hysbakke toe hardloop, oorweeg Harry weer sy opsies. Die kanse was nooit goed dat die hangertjie hier in die Ministerie sal wees nie en daar is min hoop om Umbridge te toor en uit te vind waar dit is terwyl sy in 'n stampvol hof sit. Hulle prioriteit moet nou wees om by die Ministerie uit te kom voor hulle ontmasker word en dan 'n ander dag weer te probeer. Die eerste ding om te doen is om Ron op te spoor en dan kan hulle saam dink aan 'n manier om Hermione by die hofsaal uit te kry.

Die hysbak kom leeg by hom aan. Harry spring in en haal die Onsigbaarheidsmantel van hom af toe dit begin daal. Toe dit op Vlak Twee tot stilstand ratel, is sy verligting ontsaglik toe 'n papnat Ron met wilde oë inklim.

"M – môre," stamel hy vir Harry toe die hysbak weer begin beweeg.

"Ron, dis ek, Harry!"

"Harry! Demmit, ek't vergeet hoe jy lyk – hoekom is Hermione nie by jou nie?"

"Sy moes saam met Umbridge af na die hofsale toe gaan; sy kon nie weier nie en –"

Maar voor Harry kan klaar praat, stop die hysbak weer: die deure gaan oop en meneer Weasley stap in, diep in gesprek met 'n bejaarde heks wie se blonde hare so hoog gepluiskam is dat dit soos 'n miershoop lyk.

". . . Ek verstaan heeltemal wat jy sê, Wakanda, maar ek is bevrees ek kan nie deel wees van –"

Meneer Weasley hou op praat, want hy het Harry opgemerk. Dit is baie vreemd om te sien dat meneer Weasley hom met soveel misnoeë aanstaar. Die hysbak se deure gaan toe en die vier van hulle kruie verder ondertoe.

"O hallo, Reg," sê meneer Weasley wat omkyk toe hy die aanhoudende gedrup uit Ron se kleed hoor. "Word jou vrou nie vandag ondervra nie? E – wat het met jou gebeur? Hoekom is jy so nat?"

"Dit reën in Yaxley se kantoor," sê Ron. Hy praat met meneer Weasley se skouer en Harry is seker hy is bang sy pa gaan hom herken as hulle mekaar direk in die oë kyk. "Ek kon dit nie stop nie, toe stuur hulle my om vir Bernie – ek dink hulle't gesê Pillsworth – te gaan haal –"

"Ja, dit reën die afgelope tyd in baie kantore," sê meneer Weasley. "Het jy *meteolopaljas recanto* probeer? Dit het vir Bletchley gewerk."

"*Meteolopaljas recanto?*" fluister Ron. "Nee, ek het nie. Dankie, P – ek bedoel, dankie, Arthur."

Die hysbak se deure gaan oop; die ou heks met die miershoophare klim uit en Ron skiet verby haar en verdwyn. Harry wil hom volg, maar sy pad word versper deur Percy Weasley wat by die hysbak inkom met sy neus begrawe in dokumente wat hy lees.

Eers toe die deure weer kletterend toegaan, besef Percy hy is in 'n hysbak saam met sy pa. Hy kyk skrams op, sien meneer Weasley, word radysrooi en klim die oomblik dat die deure weer oopgaan by die hysbak uit. Harry probeer vir die tweede keer uitkom, maar hierdie keer blokkeer meneer Weasley se arm hom.

"Net 'n oomblik, Runcorn."

Die hysbak se deure gaan toe en terwyl hulle nog 'n vloer laer aframmel, sê meneer Weasley: "Ek hoor jy het inligting oor Dirk Cresswell voorgelê."

Harry kry die indruk die ontmoeting met Percy het meneer Weasley se woede erger gemaak. Hy besluit dit is die beste om hom maar dom te hou.

"Ekskuus?" sê hy.

"Moenie jou onskuldig hou nie, Runcorn," sê meneer Weasley ontstoke. "Jy het die towenaar wat sy stamboom vervals het, opgespoor, nie waar nie?"

"Ek – wat daarvan as ek het?" sê Harry.

"Dirk Cresswell is tien keer die towenaar wat jy is," sê meneer Weasley sag terwyl die hysbak nog laer sak. "En as hy Azkaban oorleef, sal jy moet rekenskap gee aan hom, om nie te praat van sy vrou, sy seuns en sy vriende –"

"Arthur," val Harry in die rede, "jy weet jy word dopgehou, nè?"

"Is dit 'n dreigement, Runcorn?" sê meneer Weasley hard.

"Nee," sê Harry, "dis 'n feit! Hulle weet van elke beweging wat jy maak –"

Die hysbak se deure gaan oop. Hulle is nou by die Atrium. Meneer Weasley gee Harry 'n kil kyk en storm by die hysbak uit. Harry staan daar en bewe. Hy wens hy het iemand anders as Runcorn nageaap . . . die hysbak se deure gaan kletterend toe.

Harry haal die Onsigbaarheidsmantel uit en gooi dit weer oor hom. Hy sal nou maar op sy eie gaan probeer om Hermione te red terwyl Ron verder met die reën in die kantoor opsnork. Toe die deure oopgaan, klim hy uit in 'n gang wat met fakkels verlig word en heeltemal anders lyk as die boonste gange met die houtpanele en tapyte. Die hysbak ratel weer weg; Harry ril effens en kyk na die swart deur in die verte wat die ingang tot die Departement van Geheime is.

Hy begin aanstap, nie na die swart deur toe nie, maar na die deur aan die linkerkant; hy onthou dit maak oop op 'n stel trappe wat af na die hofsale toe lei. Sy verstand worstel met moontlikhede terwyl hy ondertoe beweeg. Hy het nog 'n paar Afleidingsknallers, maar miskien sal dit beter wees om eenvoudig aan die hofsaal se deur te klop, as Runcorn in te gaan en te vra of hy vinnig met Mafalda kan praat? Hy weet natuurlik nie of Runcorn belangrik genoeg is om hiermee weg te kom nie, en selfs al sou hy dit regkry, kan die feit dat Hermione nie weer verskyn nie aanleiding gee tot 'n soektog nog voor hulle veilig by die Ministerie uit is . . .

Hy is so diep ingedagte dat hy die onnatuurlike koue wat hom bekruip soos hy in 'n mistigheid afbeweeg nie dadelik opmerk nie. Dit word kouer en kouer met elke tree wat hy gee: 'n koue wat in sy keel af reik en aan sy longe ruk. En dan voel hy hoe daardie sluipende gevoel van wanhoop, van troosteloosheid hom binnedring, hom oorrompel . . .

Dementors, dink hy.

En toe hy aan die onderkant van die trap kom en regs draai, sien hy 'n afgryslike toneel. Die donker gang buite die hofsale is gepak met lang figure in swart mantels, hulle gesigte heeltemal verberg onder die mantelkappe, hulle onreëlmatige asemhaling die enigste geluid in die plek. Die doodsbang Moggelgeborenes wat vir ondervraging ingebring is, sit ineengekrimp en bewend op harde houtbanke. Die meeste van hulle steek hulle gesigte in hulle hande weg, miskien in 'n instinktiewe poging om hulle teen die Dementors se gulsige monde te beskerm. Party word vergesel van familie, ander sit alleen. Die Dementors gly op en af voor hulle verby en die koue

en die troosteloosheid en die wanhoop van die plek tref Harry soos 'n vloek . . .

Weg daarteen, sê hy vir homself, maar hy weet hy kan nie hier 'n Patronus optower sonder om homself oombliklik te ontmasker nie. Daarom beweeg hy verder, so stil as wat hy kan, en met elke tree wat hy gee, voel dit of daar 'n doodse gevoel oor sy brein kruip, maar hy dwing homself om te dink aan Hermione en aan Ron wat hom nodig het.

Dit is angswekkend om tussen die swart figure wat bo almal uittroon deur te beweeg; die ooglose gesigte wat agter die mantelkappe weggesteek is, draai soos hy verbybeweeg en hy is seker hulle voel hom aan, voel miskien aan hier is 'n menslike teenwoordigheid met nog 'n mate van hoop, 'n mate van lewenskrag . . .

En toe, skielik en skokkend te midde van die bevrore stilte, vlieg een van die kerkerdeure aan die linkerkant van die gang oop en gille weerklink daarvandaan.

"Nee, nee, ek's 'n halfbloed, ek's 'n halfbloed, ek sê julle! My pa was 'n towenaar, hy *was*! Slaan hom na, Arkie Alderton, hy's 'n bekende besemstokontwerper, slaan hom na, ek sê julle – Vat julle hande van my af, vat julle hande af –"

"Dit is jou laaste waarskuwing," sê Umbridge se sagte stem, met towerkrag versterk sodat dit duidelik hoorbaar is oor die man se desperate gille. "As jy jou teësit, sal jy aan die Dementorskus onderwerp word."

Die man se gille bedaar, maar droë snikke eggo deur die gang.

"Neem hom weg," sê Umbridge.

Twee Dementors verskyn in die hofsaal se deur; hulle verrotte, skubberige hande het 'n stewige greep op die boarms van 'n towenaar wat lyk of hy flou word. Hulle sweef met hom by die gang af en die duisternis wat hulle agter hulle aansleep, sluk hom in.

"Volgende – Mary Cattermole," kondig Umbridge aan.

'n Klein vroutjie staan op; sy bibber van kop tot tone. Haar donker hare is weggevat in 'n bolla en sy dra 'n lang, eenvoudige kleed. Haar gesig is heeltemal bloedloos. Soos sy verby die Dementors beweeg, sien Harry haar ril.

Hy doen dit instinktief, sonder dat hy enige plan het, want hy kan dit nie verdra dat sy alleen by die kerker moet inloop nie: toe die deur begin toeswaai, glip hy agter haar aan by die hofsaal in.

Dit is nie dieselfde vertrek waarin hy eenkeer oor die ongemagtigde gebruik van towerkrag ondervra is nie. Hierdie een is baie kleiner, al is die plafon omtrent net so hoog; dit gee 'n mens die kloustrofobiese gevoel dat jy onder in 'n diep put vasgekeer is.

Daar is nóg Dementors hier. Hulle werp hulle vriesende aura oor die plek en staan soos gesiglose wagte in die hoeke verste van die hoë, verhewe platform af. Hier sit Umbridge agter 'n reling met Yaxley aan haar een kant en Hermione, net so wit in die gesig soos mevrou Cattermole, aan die ander kant. Aan die voet van die platform paradeer 'n heldersilwer langhaarkat op en af, op en af, en Harry besef dit is daar om die vervolgers te beskerm teen die wanhoop wat uit die Dementors vloei: die aangeklaagdes moet dit voel, nie die aanklaers nie.

"Sit," sê Umbridge in haar sagte, stroperige stem.

Mevrou Cattermole strompel na 'n stoel wat alleen in die middel van die vloer onder die verhewe platform staan. Die oomblik dat sy sit, rinkel daar kettings uit die stoel se armleunings en bind haar daaraan vas.

"Is jy Mary Elizabeth Cattermole?" vra Umbridge.

Mevrou Cattermole gee 'n enkele bewerige kopknik.

"Getroud met Reginald Cattermole van die Towerinstandhoudingsdepartement?"

Mevrou Cattermole bars in trane uit.

"Ek weet nie waar is hy nie. Hy was veronderstel om my hier te ontmoet!"

Umbridge ignoreer haar.

"Moeder van Maisie, Ellie en Alfred Cattermole?"

Mevrou Cattermole snik harder as ooit.

"Hulle's bang; hulle dink ek gaan dalk nie huis toe kom nie –"

"Spaar ons dit," sis Yaxley. "Modderbloede se snuiters wek nie ons simpatie nie."

Mevrou Cattermole se snikke verberg Harry se voetstappe toe hy versigtig mik na die trappies wat op na die verhewe platform toe lei. Die oomblik dat hy verby die plek is waar die Patronuskat patroleer, voel hy 'n verandering in temperatuur: dit is warm en gemaklik hier. Hy is seker dit is Umbridge se Patronus en dit gloei helder, want sy is so gelukkig hier, in haar element, besig om die verwronge wette wat sy help skryf het, af te dwing. Stadig en baie versigtig beweeg hy voetjie vir voetjie oor die platform tot agter Umbridge, Yaxley en Hermione en gaan sit dan agter laasgenoemde. Hy is bang hy laat Hermione wip van die skrik. Hy oorweeg dit om 'n *Muffliato*-vloek oor Umbridge en Yaxley uit te spreek, maar selfs al fluister hy net die woord, kan dit Hermione skrikmaak. Dan verhef Umbridge haar stem om mevrou Cattermole aan te spreek en Harry benut sy kans.

"Ek is agter jou," fluister hy in Hermione se oor.

Net hy verwag het, skrik sy so groot dat sy amper die botteltjie ink waarmee sy veronderstel is om rekord van die onderhoud te hou, omstamp, maar Umbridge en Yaxley konsentreer op mevrou Cattermole en kom dit nie agter nie.

"'n Towerstaf is by jou gekonfiskeer met jou aankoms in die Ministerie vandag, mevrou Cattermole," sê Umbridge. "Agt en 'n driekwart duim, kersie, eenhoringhaarkern. Is daardie beskrywing vir jou bekend?"

Mevrou Cattermole knik en vee haar oë aan haar mou af.

"Kan jy asseblief vir ons sê by watter heks of towenaar jy daardie towerstaf gevat het?"

"G – gevat?" snik mevrou Cattermole. "Ek het dit nie by iemand g – gevat nie. Ek het dit g – gekoop toe ek elf jaar oud was. Dit – dit – dit het my *gekies*."

Sy huil harder as ooit.

Umbridge lag 'n sagte, dogtertjierige laggie wat maak dat Harry haar te lyf wil gaan. Sy leun vorentoe oor die versperring om haar slagoffer beter te kan bekyk en iets gouds swaai ook vorentoe en hang oor die oopte: die hangertjie.

Hermione sien dit en gee 'n gilletjie, maar Umbridge en Yaxley fokus so intens op hulle slagoffer dat hulle doof is vir enigiets anders.

"Nee," sê Umbridge, "nee, ek dink nie so nie, mevrou Cattermole. Towerstawwe kies slegs hekse of towenaars. Jy is nie 'n heks nie. Ek het jou antwoorde op die vraelys wat aan jou gestuur is hier – Mafalda, gee dit vir my aan."

Umbridge hou 'n klein handjie uit: sy lyk op daardie oomblik so baie soos 'n padda dat Harry nogal verbaas is om nie webbe tussen haar stompievingers te sien nie. Hermione se hande bewe van skok. Sy tas rond tussen 'n stapel dokumente op die stoel langs haar en trek uiteindelik 'n perkamentrol met mevrou Cattermole se naam daarop uit.

"Dis – dis mooi, Dolores," sê sy en wys na die hangertjie wat in die valletjies van Umbridge se bloese blink.

"Wat?" vra Umbridge en kyk af. "O ja – dis 'n ou familie-erfstuk," sê sy en streel die hangertjie wat op haar groot boesem lê. "Die 'S' staan vir Selwyn . . . Ek is verwant aan die Selwyns . . . Om die waarheid te sê, daar is min suiwerbloedfamilies aan wie ek nie verwant is nie . . . Dis jammer," gaan sy in 'n harder stem voort en blaai deur mevrou Cattermole se vraelys, "dieselfde kan nie van jou gesê word nie. Ouers se beroep: groentehandelaars."

Yaxley lag spottend. Onder loop die wollerige silwer kat op en af en die Dementors staan en wag in die hoeke.

Dit is Umbridge se leuen wat die bloed na Harry se brein laat opskiet en maak dat hy alle versigtigheid oorboord gooi. Hoe kan sy 'n hangertjie wat sy met omkopery by 'n kleindief gevat het, gebruik om haar eie geloofwaardigheid as 'n suiwerbloed te verhoog? Hy lig sy towerstaf, doen nie eens die moeite om dit onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel weg te steek nie en sê: "*Bedwelm!*"

Daar flits 'n rooi lig. Umbridge frommel op en haar voorkop tref die kant van die versperring; mevrou Cattermole se dokumente gly van haar skoot af tot op die vloer, en onder verdwyn die paraderende silwer kat. Yskoue lug tref hulle soos 'n aankomende wind: Yaxley kyk verward om na die bron van die moeilikheid en sien Harry se liggaamlose hand en towerstaf wat op hom gerig is. Hy probeer sy eie towerstaf uitpluk, maar dit is te laat.

"*Bedwelm!*"

Yaxley gly af grond toe en lê opgekrul op die vloer.

"Harry!"

"Hermione, as jy dink ek gaan hier sit en toelaat dat sy maak asof –"

"Harry, mevrou Cattermole!"

Harry swaai om en gooi die Onsigbaarheidsmantel van hom af. Onder het die Dementors uit hulle hoeke beweeg en hulle sweef nou na die vrou wat aan die stoel vasgeketting is. Harry is nie seker of dit is omdat die Patronus verdwyn het of omdat hulle aanvoel dat hulle meesters nie meer in beheer is nie, maar dit lyk of hulle hulle nie meer gaan bedwing nie. Mevrou Cattermole uiter 'n aaklige kreet van vrees toe 'n slymerige, skubberige hand haar ken gryp en haar gesig agtertoe dwing.

"*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*"

Die silwer takbok sweef by die punt van Harry se towerstaf uit en spring in die rigting van die Dementors wat terugval en weer in die donker skadu's wegsmelt. Die takbok se lig is sterker en warmer as die kat se beskerming en vul die hele kerker terwyl hy om en om in die vertrek galop.

"Kry die Horcrux," sê Harry vir Hermione.

Hy hardloop weer by die trappies af, prop die Onsigbaarheidsmantel terug in sy sak en beweeg na mevrou Cattermole toe.

"Jy?" fluister sy en staar na sy gesig. "Maar – maar Reg het gesê jy's die een wat my naam vir ondervraging voorgelê het!"

"Het ek?" prewel Harry en pluk aan die kettings wat haar arms vasbind. "Wel, ek voel nou anders oor jou. *Diffindo!*" Niks gebeur nie. "Hermione, hoe raak ek van hierdie kettings ontslae?"

"Wag, ek probeer gou iets hier bo –"

"Hermione, ons word omring deur Dementors!"

"Ek weet, Harry, maar as sy wakker word en die hangertjie is weg – ek moet 'n duplikaat daarvan maak . . . *Germinio!* Daar's hy . . dit behoort haar om die bos te lei . . ."

Hermione hardloop af ondertoe.

"Kom ons kyk . . . *Relashio!*"

Die kettings rinkel en verdwyn weer terug in die stoel se armleunings. Mevrou Cattermole lyk nog net so verskrik soos vantevore.

"Ek verstaan nie," fluister sy.

"Jy gaan saam met ons hier uit," sê Harry en trek haar op die been. "Gaan huis toe, gryp jou kinders en gee pad, gee pad uit die land as julle moet. Vermom julle en vlug. Jy't gesien hoe gaan dit; jy sal nooit naastenby 'n regverdige verhoor hier kry nie."

"Harry," sê Hermione, "hoe gaan ons hier uitkom met al daardie Dementors buite die deur?"

"Patronusse," sê Harry en mik met sy towerstaf na syne: die takbok verslap sy pas en begin na die deur toe loop terwyl hy nog steeds helder glinster. "Soveel as wat ons kan optower; doen joune, Hermione."

"Expec – expecto patronum," sê Hermione. Niks gebeur nie.

"Dis die enigste towerspreuk waarmee sy ooit sukkel," sê Harry vir 'n absoluut verbysterde mevrou Cattermole. "Eintlik nogal jammer, nè? . . . Komaan, Hermione . . ."

"Expecto patronum!"

'n Silwer otter bars uit die punt van Hermione se towerstaf en swem grasieus deur die lug om by die takbok aan te sluit.

"Komaan," sê Harry en lei Hermione en mevrou Cattermole na die deur toe.

Toe die Patronusse by die kerker uitgly, gee die mense wat buite wag uitroepe van skok. Harry kyk om; die Dementors val aan albei kante terug van hulle, vloei in die donker in, wyk voor die silwer diere.

"Daar is besluit julle moet almal huis toe gaan en saam met julle gesinne skuiling gaan soek," sê Harry vir die wagtende Moggelgeborenes wat verblind is deur die Patronusse se lig en nog steeds effens terugdeins. "Gaan oorsee as julle kan. Kom net ver van die Ministerie af weg. Dis die – e – nuwe amptelike standpunt. Volg net hierdie Patronusse, dan sal julle deur die Atrium hier kan uitkom."

Hulle slaag daarin om by die kliptrappies op te gaan sonder dat hulle onderskep word, maar toe hulle die hysbakke nader, begin Harry bedenkinge kry. As hulle in die Atrium opdaag met 'n silwer takbok, 'n otter wat langs hom sweef, en twintig of so mense waarvan die helfte aangeklaagde Moggelgeborenes is, kan hy nie help

om te voel hulle sal onnodig aandag trek nie. Hy het pas tot hierdie onaangename gevolgtrekking gekom toe die hysbak kletterend voor hulle tot stilstand kom.

"Reg!" skree mevrou Cattermole en werp haar in Ron se arms. "Runcorn het my bevry, hy't Umbridge en Yaxley aangeval en hy't vir ons almal gesê om die land te verlaat en ek dink ons beter dit doen, Reg, ek dink regtig so. Kom ons gaan dadelik huis toe en kry die kinders en – hoekom is jy so nat?"

"Water," mompel Ron en wikkel hom los. "Harry, hulle weet daar is indringers in die Ministerie; iets van 'n gat in Umbridge se deur. Ek reken ons het vyf minute op die meeste –"

Hermione se Patronus verdwyn met 'n *plof* soos sy met afgryse vervul na Harry toe draai.

"Harry, as ons hier vasgekeer is –!"

"Ons sal nie wees as ons vinnig beweeg nie," sê Harry. Hy praat met die stil groep agter hulle wat hom almal aangaap.

"Wie het 'n towerstaf?"

Omtrent die helfte van die mense lig hulle hande.

"Oukei, almal van julle wat nie 'n towerstaf het nie, hou vas aan iemand wat een het. Ons sal moet gou maak – voor hulle ons stop. Komaan."

Almal kry dit reg om by twee hysbakke in te druk. Harry se Patronus staan wag voor die goue traliewerk terwyl hulle toegaan en die hysbakke boontoe begin beweeg.

"Vlak Agt," sê die heks se koel stem, "Atrium."

Harry besef dadelik hulle is in die moeilikheid. Die Atrium is vol mense wat van kaggel na kaggel beweeg en hulle verseël.

"Harry!" piep Hermione. "Wat gaan ons doen –?"

"STOP!" bulder Harry en Runcorn se sterk stem eggo deur die Atrium: die towenaars wat die kaggels toestaan, vries. "Volg my," fluister hy vir die groep beangste Moggelgeborenes wat vorentoe bondel terwyl Ron en Hermione hulle soos skape aanjaag.

"Wat gaan aan, Albert?" vra dieselfde bles towenaar wat vroeër net ná Harry by die kaggel uitgekom het. Hy lyk gespanne.

"Hierdie spul moet hier uit voor julle die uitgange verseël," sê Harry met al die gesag wat hy bymekaar kan skraap.

Die groep towenaars voor hom kyk na mekaar.

"Ons is aangesê om al die uitgange te verseël en niemand toe te laat om –"

"*Praat jy teë met my?*" brul Harry. "Wil jy hê ek moet jou familie se stamboom laat ondersoek soos ek met Dirk Cresswell s'n laat doen het?"

"Ekskuus!" snak die bles towenaar en retireer. "Ek het niks daarmee bedoel nie, Albert . . . Ek dog maar net hulle's hier vir ondervraging en . . ."

"Hulle bloed is suiwer," sê Harry en sy diep stem weergalm indrukwekkend deur die portaal. "Waarskynlik suiwerder as baie van julle s'n. Weg is julle!" sê hy dawerend vir die Moggelgeborenes wat in aller yl op die kaggels afpyl en twee-twee begin verdwyn. Die Ministerie se towenaars bly op 'n afstand: party lyk verward, ander bang en gekrenk. Dan –

"Mary!"

Mevrou Cattermole kyk oor haar skouer. Die regte Reg Cattermole, wat nie meer opgooi nie, maar bleek en asvaal lyk, het so pas by die hysbak uitgehardloop gekom.

"R – Reg?"

Sy kyk van haar man na Ron wat hardop vloek.

Die bles towenaar se mond val oop, sy kop draai komieklik van die een Reg Cattermole na die ander een.

"Hei – wat gaan aan? Wat de drommel –?"

"Verseël die uitgang! VERSEËL DIT!"

Yaxley het intussen by 'n ander hysbak uitgebars en storm nou na die groep langs die kaggels waarin al die Moggelgeborenes behalwe mevrou Cattermole reeds verdwyn het. Die bles towenaar lig sy towerstaf, maar Harry se enorme vuis tref hom en laat hom deur die lug vlieg.

"Hy't die Moggelgeborenes gehelp ontsnap, Yaxley!" skree Harry.

Die bles towenaar se kollegas maak hewig beswaar en Ron benut hierdie kans om mevrou Cattermole te gryp, haar by die kaggel wat nog oop is in te trek en te verdwyn. Yaxley kyk verward van Harry na die towenaar wat hy geslaan het terwyl die regte Reg Cattermole skree: "My vrou! Wie was dit daai met my vrou? Wat gaan aan?"

Harry sien Yaxley se kop draai en sien 'n vermoede van die waarheid tot daardie onmenslike gesig deurdring.

"Komaan!" skree Harry vir Hermione. Hy gryp haar hand en hulle spring saam in die kaggel soos Yaxley se vloek oor Harry se kop seil. Hulle draai vir 'n paar sekondes in die rondte voor hulle op- en dan by 'n toilet uitskiet tot in 'n hokkie. Harry pluk die deur oop; Ron staan daar langs die wasbakke en stoei nog steeds met mevrou Cattermole.

"Reg, ek verstaan nie –"

"Los my, ek's nie jou man nie; jy moet huis toe gaan!"

Daar is 'n geluid in die hokkie agter hulle. Harry kyk om; Yaxley het so pas verskyn.

"WEG IS ONS!" gil Harry. Hy gryp Hermione aan die hand en Ron aan die arm en begin op een plek tol.

Duisternis verswelg hulle, saam met die gevoel van bande wat hulle saampers, maar iets is verkeerd . . . Dit voel of Hermione se hand uit sy greep gly . . .

Hy wonder of hy gaan versmoor; hy kan nie asemhaal of sien nie, en die enigste soliede dinge in die wêreld is Ron se arm en Hermione se vingers wat stadig wegglip . . .

En dan sien hy Grimmauldplein twaalf se deur met sy slangdeurklopper, maar voor hy kan inasem, is daar 'n gil en 'n pers ligflits; Hermione se hand klem syne skielik in 'n staalgreep vas en alles word weer donker.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



THE THIEF

Harry opened his eyes and was dazzled by gold and green; he had no idea what had happened, he only knew that he was lying on what seemed to be leaves and twigs. Struggling to draw breath into lungs that felt flattened, he blinked and realized that the gaudy glare was sunlight streaming through a canopy of leaves far above him. Then an object twitched close to his face. He pushed himself onto his hands and knees, ready to face some small, fierce creature, but saw that the object was Ron's foot. Looking around, Harry saw that they and Hermione were lying on a forest floor, apparently alone.

Harry's first thought was of the Forbidden Forest, and for a

moment, even though he knew how foolish and dangerous it would be for them to appear in the grounds of Hogwarts, his heart leapt at the thought of sneaking through the trees to Hagrid's hut. However, in the few moments it took for Ron to give a low groan and Harry to start crawling toward him, he realized that this was not the Forbidden Forest: The trees looked younger, they were more widely spaced, the ground clearer.

He met Hermione, also on her hands and knees, at Ron's head. The moment his eyes fell upon Ron, all other concerns fled Harry's mind, for blood drenched the whole of Ron's left side and his face stood out, grayish-white, against the leaf-strewn earth. The Polyjuice Potion was wearing off now: Ron was halfway between Cattermole and himself in appearance, his hair turning redder and redder as his face drained of the little color it had left.

"What's happened to him?"

"Splinched," said Hermione, her fingers already busy at Ron's sleeve, where the blood was wettest and darkest.

Harry watched, horrified, as she tore open Ron's shirt. He had always thought of Splinching as something comical, but this . . . His insides crawled unpleasantly as Hermione laid bare Ron's upper arm, where a great chunk of flesh was missing, scooped cleanly away as though by a knife.

"Harry, quickly, in my bag, there's a small bottle labeled 'Essence of Dittany' —"

"Bag — right —"

Harry sped to the place where Hermione had landed, seized the tiny beaded bag, and thrust his hand inside it. At once, object after

object began presenting itself to his touch: He felt the leather spines of books, woolly sleeves of jumpers, heels of shoes —

"Quickly!"

He grabbed his wand from the ground and pointed it into the depths of the magical bag.

"Accio Dittany!"

A small brown bottle zoomed out of the bag; he caught it and hastened back to Hermione and Ron, whose eyes were now half-closed, strips of white eyeball all that were visible between his lids.

"He's fainted," said Hermione, who was also rather pale; she no longer looked like Mafalda, though her hair was still gray in places. "Unstopper it for me, Harry, my hands are shaking."

Harry wrenched the stopper off the little bottle, Hermione took it and poured three drops of the potion onto the bleeding wound. Greenish smoke billowed upward and when it had cleared, Harry saw that the bleeding had stopped. The wound now looked several days old; new skin stretched over what had just been open flesh.

"Wow," said Harry.

"It's all I feel safe doing," said Hermione shakily. "There are spells that would put him completely right, but I daren't try in case I do them wrong and cause more damage. . . . He's lost so much blood already. . . ."

"How did he get hurt? I mean" — Harry shook his head, trying to clear it, to make sense of whatever had just taken place — "why are we here? I thought we were going back to Grimmauld Place?"

Hermione took a deep breath. She looked close to tears.

"Harry, I don't think we're going to be able to go back there."

"What d'you — ?"

"As we Disapparated, Yaxley caught hold of me and I couldn't get rid of him, he was too strong, and he was still holding on when we arrived at Grimmauld Place, and then — well, I think he must have seen the door, and thought we were stopping there, so he slackened his grip and I managed to shake him off and I brought us here instead!"

"But then, where's he? Hang on. . . . You don't mean he's at Grimmauld Place? He can't get in there?"

Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears as she nodded.

"Harry, I think he can. I — I forced him to let go with a Revulsion Jinx, but I'd already taken him inside the Fidelius Charm's protection. Since Dumbledore died, we're Secret-Keepers, so I've given him the secret, haven't I?"

There was no pretending; Harry was sure she was right. It was a serious blow. If Yaxley could now get inside the house, there was no way that they could return. Even now, he could be bringing other Death Eaters in there by Apparition. Gloomy and oppressive though the house was, it had been their one safe refuge: even, now that Kreacher was so much happier and friendlier, a kind of home. With a twinge of regret that had nothing to do with food, Harry imagined the house-elf busying himself over the steak-and-kidney pie that Harry, Ron, and Hermione would never eat.

"Harry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

"Don't be stupid, it wasn't your fault! If anything, it was mine. . . ."

Harry put his hand in his pocket and drew out Mad-Eye's eye. Hermione recoiled, looking horrified.

"Umbridge had stuck it to her office door, to spy on people. I couldn't leave it there . . . but that's how they knew there were intruders."

Before Hermione could answer, Ron groaned and opened his eyes. He was still gray and his face glistened with sweat.

"How d'you feel?" Hermione whispered.

"Lousy," croaked Ron, wincing as he felt his injured arm. "Where are we?"

"In the woods where they held the Quidditch World Cup," said Hermione. "I wanted somewhere enclosed, undercover, and this was —"

"— the first place you thought of," Harry finished for her, glancing around at the apparently deserted glade. He could not help remembering what had happened the last time they had Apparated to the first place Hermione had thought of — how Death Eaters had found them within minutes. Had it been Legilimency? Did Voldemort or his henchmen know, even now, where Hermione had taken them?

"D'you reckon we should move on?" Ron asked Harry, and Harry could tell by the look on Ron's face that he was thinking the same.

"I dunno."

Ron still looked pale and clammy. He had made no attempt to sit up and it looked as though he was too weak to do so. The prospect of moving him was daunting.

"Let's stay here for now," Harry said.

Looking relieved, Hermione sprang to her feet.

"Where are you going?" asked Ron.

"If we're staying, we should put some protective enchantments

around the place," she replied, and raising her wand, she began to walk in a wide circle around Harry and Ron, murmuring incantations as she went. Harry saw little disturbances in the surrounding air: It was as if Hermione had cast a heat haze upon their clearing.

"*Salvio Hexia . . . Protego Totalum . . . Repello Muggletum . . . Muffliato* . . . You could get out the tent, Harry. . . ."

"Tent?"

"In the bag!"

"In the . . . of course," said Harry.

He did not bother to grope inside it this time, but used another Summoning Charm. The tent emerged in a lumpy mass of canvas, rope, and poles. Harry recognized it, partly because of the smell of cats, as the same tent in which they had slept on the night of the Quidditch World Cup.

"I thought this belonged to that bloke Perkins at the Ministry?" he asked, starting to disentangle the tent pegs.

"Apparently he didn't want it back, his lumbago's so bad," said Hermione, now performing complicated figure-of-eight movements with her wand, "so Ron's dad said I could borrow it. *Erecto!*" she added, pointing her wand at the misshapen canvas, which in one fluid motion rose into the air and settled, fully constructed, onto the ground before Harry, out of whose startled hands a tent peg soared, to land with a final thud at the end of a guy rope.

"Cave Inimicum," Hermione finished with a skyward flourish. "That's as much as I can do. At the very least, we should know they're coming, I can't guarantee it will keep out Vol —"

"Don't say the name!" Ron cut across her, his voice harsh.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other.

"I'm sorry," Ron said, moaning a little as he raised himself to look at them, "but it feels like a — a jinx or something. Can't we call him You-Know-Who — please?"

"Dumbledore said fear of a name —" began Harry.

"In case you hadn't noticed, mate, calling You-Know-Who by his name didn't do Dumbledore much good in the end," Ron snapped back. "Just — just show You-Know-Who some respect, will you?"

"Respect?" Harry repeated, but Hermione shot him a warning look; apparently he was not to argue with Ron while the latter was in such a weakened condition.

Harry and Hermione half carried, half dragged Ron through the entrance of the tent. The interior was exactly as Harry remembered it: a small flat, complete with bathroom and tiny kitchen. He shoved aside an old armchair and lowered Ron carefully onto the lower berth of a bunk bed. Even this very short journey had turned Ron whiter still, and once they had settled him on the mattress he closed his eyes again and did not speak for a while.

"I'll make some tea," said Hermione breathlessly, pulling kettle and mugs from the depths of her bag and heading toward the kitchen.

Harry found the hot drink as welcome as the firewhisky had been on the night that Mad-Eye had died; it seemed to burn away a little of the fear fluttering in his chest. After a minute or two, Ron broke the silence.

"What d'you reckon happened to the Cattermoles?"

"With any luck, they'll have got away," said Hermione, clutching her hot mug for comfort. "As long as Mr. Cattermole had his wits

about him, he'll have transported Mrs. Cattermole by Side-Along-Apparition and they'll be fleeing the country right now with their children. That's what Harry told her to do."

"Blimey, I hope they escaped," said Ron, leaning back on his pillows. The tea seemed to be doing him good; a little of his color had returned. "I didn't get the feeling Reg Cattermole was all that quick-witted, though, the way everyone was talking to me when I was him. God, I hope they made it. . . . If they both end up in Azkaban because of us . . ."

Harry looked over at Hermione and the question he had been about to ask — about whether Mrs. Cattermole's lack of a wand would prevent her Apparating alongside her husband — died in his throat. Hermione was watching Ron fret over the fate of the Cattermoles, and there was such tenderness in her expression that Harry felt almost as if he had surprised her in the act of kissing him.

"So, have you got it?" Harry asked her, partly to remind her that he was there.

"Got — got what?" she said with a little start.

"What did we just go through all that for? The locket! Where's the locket?"

"You got it?" shouted Ron, raising himself a little higher on his pillows. "No one tells me anything! Blimey, you could have mentioned it!"

"Well, we were running for our lives from the Death Eaters, weren't we?" said Hermione. "Here."

And she pulled the locket out of the pocket of her robes and handed it to Ron.

It was as large as a chicken's egg. An ornate letter *S*, inlaid with many small green stones, glinted dully in the diffused light shining through the tent's canvas roof.

"There isn't any chance someone's destroyed it since Kreacher had it?" asked Ron hopefully. "I mean, are we sure it's still a Horcrux?"

"I think so," said Hermione, taking it back from him and looking at it closely. "There'd be some sign of damage if it had been magically destroyed."

She passed it to Harry, who turned it over in his fingers. The thing looked perfect, pristine. He remembered the mangled remains of the diary, and how the stone in the Horcrux ring had been cracked open when Dumbledore destroyed it.

"I reckon Kreacher's right," said Harry. "We're going to have to work out how to open this thing before we can destroy it."

Sudden awareness of what he was holding, of what lived behind the little golden doors, hit Harry as he spoke. Even after all their efforts to find it, he felt a violent urge to fling the locket from him. Mastering himself again, he tried to prise the locket apart with his fingers, then attempted the charm Hermione had used to open Regulus's bedroom door. Neither worked. He handed the locket back to Ron and Hermione, each of whom did their best, but were no more successful at opening it than he had been.

"Can you feel it, though?" Ron asked in a hushed voice, as he held it tight in his clenched fist.

"What d'you mean?"

Ron passed the Horcrux to Harry. After a moment or two, Harry

thought he knew what Ron meant. Was it his own blood pulsing through his veins that he could feel, or was it something beating inside the locket, like a tiny metal heart?

"What are we going to do with it?" Hermione asked.

"Keep it safe till we work out how to destroy it," Harry replied, and, little though he wanted to, he hung the chain around his own neck, dropping the locket out of sight beneath his robes, where it rested against his chest beside the pouch Hagrid had given him.

"I think we should take it in turns to keep watch outside the tent," he added to Hermione, standing up and stretching. "And we'll need to think about some food as well. You stay there," he added sharply, as Ron attempted to sit up and turned a nasty shade of green.

With the Sneakoscope Hermione had given Harry for his birthday set carefully upon the table in the tent, Harry and Hermione spent the rest of the day sharing the role of lookout. However, the Sneakoscope remained silent and still upon its point all day, and whether because of the protective enchantments and Muggle-repelling charms Hermione had spread around them, or because people rarely ventured this way, their patch of wood remained deserted, apart from occasional birds and squirrels. Evening brought no change; Harry lit his wand as he swapped places with Hermione at ten o'clock, and looked out upon a deserted scene, noting the bats fluttering high above him across the single patch of starry sky visible from their protected clearing.

He felt hungry now, and a little light-headed. Hermione had not packed any food in her magical bag, as she had assumed that they would be returning to Grimmauld Place that night, so they had had

nothing to eat except some wild mushrooms that Hermione had collected from amongst the nearest trees and stewed in a billycan. After a couple of mouthfuls Ron had pushed his portion away, looking queasy; Harry had only persevered so as not to hurt Hermione's feelings.

The surrounding silence was broken by odd rustlings and what sounded like crackings of twigs: Harry thought that they were caused by animals rather than people, yet he kept his wand held tight at the ready. His insides, already uncomfortable due to their inadequate helping of rubbery mushrooms, tingled with unease.

He had thought that he would feel elated if they managed to steal back the Horcrux, but somehow he did not; all he felt as he sat looking out at the darkness, of which his wand lit only a tiny part, was worry about what would happen next. It was as though he had been hurtling toward this point for weeks, months, maybe even years, but now he had come to an abrupt halt, run out of road.

There were other Horcruxes out there somewhere, but he did not have the faintest idea where they could be. He did not even know what all of them were. Meanwhile he was at a loss to know how to destroy the only one that they had found, the Horcrux that currently lay against the bare flesh of his chest. Curiously, it had not taken heat from his body, but lay so cold against his skin it might just have emerged from icy water. From time to time Harry thought, or perhaps imagined, that he could feel the tiny heartbeat ticking irregularly alongside his own.

Nameless forebodings crept upon him as he sat there in the dark: He tried to resist them, push them away, yet they came at him

relentlessly. *Neither can live while the other survives.* Ron and Hermione, now talking softly behind him in the tent, could walk away if they wanted to: He could not. And it seemed to Harry as he sat there trying to master his own fear and exhaustion, that the Horcrux against his chest was ticking away the time he had left. . . . *Stupid idea,* he told himself, *don't think that*. . . .

His scar was starting to prickle again. He was afraid that he was making it happen by having these thoughts, and tried to direct them into another channel. He thought of poor Kreacher, who had expected them home and had received Yaxley instead. Would the elf keep silent or would he tell the Death Eater everything he knew? Harry wanted to believe that Kreacher had changed toward him in the past month, that he would be loyal now, but who knew what would happen? What if the Death Eaters tortured the elf? Sick images swarmed into Harry's head and he tried to push these away too, for there was nothing he could do for Kreacher: He and Hermione had already decided against trying to summon him; what if someone from the Ministry came too? They could not count on elfish Apparition being free from the same flaw that had taken Yaxley to Grimmauld Place on the hem of Hermione's sleeve.

Harry's scar was burning now. He thought that there was so much they did not know: Lupin had been right about magic they had never encountered or imagined. Why hadn't Dumbledore explained more? Had he thought that there would be time; that he would live for years, for centuries perhaps, like his friend Nicolas Flamel? If so, he had been wrong. . . . Snape had seen to that. . . . Snape, the sleeping snake, who had struck at the top of the tower . . .

And Dumbledore had fallen . . . fallen . . .

"Give it to me, Gregorovitch."

Harry's voice was high, clear, and cold, his wand held in front of him by a long-fingered white hand. The man at whom he was pointing was suspended upside down in midair, though there were no ropes holding him; he swung there, invisibly and eerily bound, his limbs wrapped about him, his terrified face, on a level with Harry's, ruddy due to the blood that had rushed to his head. He had pure-white hair and a thick, bushy beard: a trussed-up Father Christmas.

"I have it not, I have it no more! It was, many years ago, stolen from me!"

"Do not lie to Lord Voldemort, Gregorovitch. He knows. . . . He always knows."

The hanging man's pupils were wide, dilated with fear, and they seemed to swell, bigger and bigger until their blackness swallowed Harry whole —

And now Harry was hurrying along a dark corridor in stout little Gregorovitch's wake as he held a lantern aloft: Gregorovitch burst into the room at the end of the passage and his lantern illuminated what looked like a workshop; wood shavings and gold gleamed in the swinging pool of light, and there on the window ledge sat perched, like a giant bird, a young man with golden hair. In the split second that the lantern's light illuminated him, Harry saw the delight upon his handsome face, then the intruder shot a Stunning Spell from his wand and jumped neatly backward out of the window with a crow of laughter.

And Harry was hurtling back out of those wide, tunnellike pupils

and Gregorovitch's face was stricken with terror.

"Who was the thief, Gregorovitch?" said the high cold voice.

"I do not know, I never knew, a young man — no — please — PLEASE!"

A scream that went on and on and then a burst of green light —

"Harry!"

He opened his eyes, panting, his forehead throbbing. He had passed out against the side of the tent, had slid sideways down the canvas, and was sprawled on the ground. He looked up at Hermione, whose bushy hair obscured the tiny patch of sky visible through the dark branches high above them.

"Dream," he said, sitting up quickly and attempting to meet Hermione's glower with a look of innocence. "Must've dozed off, sorry."

"I know it was your scar! I can tell by the look on your face! You were looking into Vol —"

"Don't say his name!" came Ron's angry voice from the depths of the tent.

"Fine," retorted Hermione. "*You-Know-Who's* mind, then!"

"I didn't mean it to happen!" Harry said. "It was a dream! Can *you* control what you dream about, Hermione?"

"If you just learned to apply Occlumency —"

But Harry was not interested in being told off; he wanted to discuss what he had just seen.

"He's found Gregorovitch, Hermione, and I think he's killed him, but before he killed him he read Gregorovitch's mind and I saw —"

"I think I'd better take over the watch if you're so tired you're falling asleep," said Hermione coldly.

"I can finish the watch!"

"No, you're obviously exhausted. Go and lie down."

She dropped down in the mouth of the tent, looking stubborn. Angry, but wishing to avoid a row, Harry ducked back inside.

Ron's still-pale face was poking out from the lower bunk; Harry climbed into the one above him, lay down, and looked up at the dark canvas ceiling. After several moments, Ron spoke in a voice so low that it would not carry to Hermione, huddled in the entrance.

"What's You-Know-Who doing?"

Harry screwed up his eyes in the effort to remember every detail, then whispered into the darkness.

"He found Gregorovitch. He had him tied up, he was torturing him."

"How's Gregorovitch supposed to make him a new wand if he's tied up?"

"I dunno. . . . It's weird, isn't it?"

Harry closed his eyes, thinking of all he had seen and heard. The more he recalled, the less sense it made . . . Voldemort had said nothing about Harry's wand, nothing about the twin cores, nothing about Gregorovitch making a new and more powerful wand to beat Harry's. . . .

"He wanted something from Gregorovitch," Harry said, eyes still closed tight. "He asked him to hand it over, but Gregorovitch said it had been stolen from him . . . and then . . . then . . ."

He remembered how he, as Voldemort, had seemed to hurtle

through Gregorovitch's eyes, into his memories . . . .

"He read Gregorovitch's mind, and I saw this young bloke perched on a windowsill, and he fired a curse at Gregorovitch and jumped out of sight. He stole it, he stole whatever You-Know-Who's after. And I . . . I think I've seen him somewhere. . . ."

Harry wished he could have another glimpse of the laughing boy's face. The theft had happened many years ago, according to Gregorovitch. Why did the young thief look familiar?

The noises of the surrounding woods were muffled inside the tent; all Harry could hear was Ron's breathing. After a while, Ron whispered, "Couldn't you see what the thief was holding?"

"No . . . it must've been something small."

"Harry?"

The wooden slats of Ron's bunk creaked as he repositioned himself in bed.

"Harry, you don't reckon You-Know-Who's after something else to turn into a Horcrux?"

"I don't know," said Harry slowly. "Maybe. But wouldn't it be dangerous for him to make another one? Didn't Hermione say he had pushed his soul to the limit already?"

"Yeah, but maybe he doesn't know that."

"Yeah . . . maybe," said Harry.

He had been sure that Voldemort had been looking for a way around the problem of the twin cores, sure that Voldemort sought a solution from the old wandmaker . . . and yet he had killed him, apparently without asking him a single question about wandlore.

What was Voldemort trying to find? Why, with the Ministry of

Magic and the Wizarding world at his feet, was he far away, intent on the pursuit of an object that Gregorovitch had once owned, and which had been stolen by the unknown thief?

Harry could still see the blond-haired youth's face; it was merry, wild; there was a Fred and George-ish air of triumphant trickery about him. He had soared from the windowsill like a bird, and Harry had seen him before, but he could not think where. . . .

With Gregorovitch dead, it was the merry-faced thief who was in danger now, and it was on him that Harry's thoughts dwelled, as Ron's snores began to rumble from the lower bunk and as he himself drifted slowly into sleep once more.

— HOOFSTUK VEERTIEN —

Die Dief

Harry maak sy oë oop en word verblind deur goud en groen. Hy het nie 'n benul van wat gebeur het nie, hy weet net hy lê op wat voel na blare en takke. Terwyl hy sukkel om lug in sy longe te kry, knip hy sy oë en besef die skerp kleure is sonlig wat deur 'n blaredak ver bokant hom stroom. Dan roer daar 'n ding naby sy gesig. Hy stoot homself tot op sy hande en knieë, gereed om die een of ander klein, wreedaardige dierasie te trotseer, maar sien die ding is Ron se voet. Harry kyk om en sien hulle en Hermione lê op 'n woudvloer, skynbaar alleen.

Harry se eerste gedagte is dat dit die Verbode Woud is en vir 'n oomblik, selfs al weet hy hoe dwaas en gevaarlik dit vir hulle sal wees om dit op Hogwarts se terrein te waag, trommel sy hart by die gedagte om deur die bome na Hagrid se hut toe te sluip. Gedurende die paar oomblikke dat dit Ron neem om 'n diep kreun te gee en vir Harry om na hom toe te kruip, besef hy egter dit is nie die Verbode Woud hierdie nie: die bome lyk jonger, hulle is verder uitmekaar en die grond is oper.

Hy kry Hermione, ook op haar hande en knieë, by Ron se kop. Die oomblik dat sy oë op Ron val, verdwyn alle ander oorwegings uit Harry se kop, want Ron se hele linkerkant is deurweek met bloed en sy gesig staan gryswit uit teen die blaarbestrooide aarde. Die Polisouspaljas raak nou uitgewerk: Ron is halfpad tussen Cattermole en homself in voorkoms; sy hare word rooier en rooier terwyl die bietjie kleur wat nog in sy gesig oor was daaruit dreineer.

"Wat het met hom gebeur?"

"Hy is verskeur," sê Hermione terwyl haar vingers reeds besig is by Ron se mou waar die bloed die meeste en donkerste is.

Harry kyk vol afgryse hoe sy Ron se hemp oopskeur. Hy het nog altyd aan verskeuring as iets snaaks, onbenulligs gedink, maar dít . . . sy ingewande kriewel ongemaklik toe Hermione Ron se boarm ontbloot: 'n groot homp vleis is weg, asof dit netjies met 'n mes weggesny is.

"Harry, gou, in my sakkie; daar's 'n botteltjie gemerk *Essekruid-essens –*"

"Handsak – reg –"

Harry haas hom na die plek waar Hermione geland het, gryp die klein kraletjiesakkie en druk sy hand daarin. Voorwerp ná voorwerp verskyn dadelik soos hy daaraan vat: hy voel die boeke se leerrûe, wollerige moue, skoenhakke –

"Maak gou!"

Hy raap sy towerstaf van die grond af op en wys daarmee by die towerhandsak se dieptes in.

"Accio essekruid!"

'n Klein bruin botteltjie zoem by die sak uit; hy vang dit en gaan haastig terug na Hermione en Ron wie se oë nou weer halftoe is: strepies wit oogbal is al wat tussen die lede sigbaar is.

"Hy't flou geword," sê Hermione wat ook taamlik bleek is. Sy lyk nie meer soos Mafalda nie, al is haar hare nog plek-plek grys. "Maak dit vir my oop, Harry, my hande bewe."

Harry trek die kurkprop uit die botteltjie, Hermione vat dit en gooi drie druppels van die towermengsel op die bloeiende wond. Groenerige rook borrel boontoe en toe dit verdwyn, sien Harry die bloeding het opgehou. Die wond lyk nou 'n hele paar dae oud; nuwe vel span oor wat tevore net oop vleis was.

"Maggies," sê Harry.

"Dis al wat ek voel ek kan veilig doen," sê Hermione bewerig. "Daar is towerspreuke wat hom heeltemal sal genees, maar ek is te bang om dit te probeer. Netnou doen ek dit verkeerd en veroorsaak nog meer skade . . . Hy't al klaar soveel bloed verloor . . ."

"Hoe het hy seergekry? Ek bedoel," Harry skud sy kop om dit te probeer helder kry, om sin te maak van wat ook al nou net gebeur het, "hoekom is ons hier? Ek dog ons sou terug Grimmauldplein toe gaan?"

Hermione haal diep asem. Sy lyk na aan trane.

"Harry, ek dink nie ons sal terug soontoe kan gaan nie."

"Wat bedoel –?"

"Toe ons Disappareer, het Yaxley my beetgekry en ek kon nie van hom ontslae raak nie, hy's te sterk, en hy het nog steeds aan my vasgehou toe ons by Grimmauldplein aankom en toe – wel, ek dink hy moet die deur gesien het en gedink het ons gaan daar stop, so toe verslap hy sy greep en ek kon hom afskud, en toe bring ek ons liewer hiernatoe!"

"Maar waar is hy dan nou? Wag bietjie . . . Bedoel jy hy's by Grimmauldplein? Hy kan daar inkom?"

Haar oë blink van ingehoue trane toe sy knik.

"Harry, ek dink hy kan. Ek – ek het hom met die Afkeerpaljas gedwing om my te los, maar ek het hom al klaar by die Fideliustowerspreuk se beskerming ingelaat. Van Dumbledore dood is, is ons Geheimhouers, so ek het die geheim aan hom gegee, of hoe?"

Dit help nie om voor te gee nie; Harry is seker sy is reg. Dit is 'n swaar slag. As Yaxley nou by die huis kan inkom, kan hulle onmoontlik soontoe teruggaan. Hy is dalk op hierdie einste oomblik besig om ander Doodseters met behulp van Apparering soontoe te bring. Al was die huis donker en somber, was dit hulle een veilige hawe: selfs 'n soort tuiste noudat Skepsel soveel gelukkiger en vriendeliker geword het. Met 'n hartseer stekie wat niks met kos te doen het nie, dink Harry hom in hoe die huiself die biefstuk-en-niertjie-pastei maak wat Harry, Ron en Hermione nooit sal eet nie.

"Harry, ek is jammer, ek is so jammer!"

"Moenie simpel wees nie, dit was nie jou skuld nie! As dit iemand s'n was, was dit myne . . ."

Harry steek sy hand in sy sak en haal Maloog se oog uit. Hermione deins terug, vervul met afgryse.

"Umbridge het dit teen haar kantoordeur vasgesit om op mense te spioeneer. Ek kon dit nie daar los nie . . . maar dis hoe hulle geweet het daar is indringers."

Voor Hermione kan antwoord, kreun Ron en maak sy oë oop. Hy is nog grys en sy gesig blink van die sweet.

"Hoe voel jy?" fluister Hermione.

"Vrot," sê Ron skor en krimp ineen van pyn toe hy aan sy beseerde arm voel. "Waar is ons?"

"In die woud waar hulle die Kwiddiek-wêreldbeker gehou het," sê Hermione. "Ek het 'n afgesonderde, geheime plek gesoek en dit was –"

"– die eerste plek waaraan jy gedink het," maak Harry haar sin klaar en kyk rond na die skynbaar verlate oopte. Hy kan nie help om te onthou wat gebeur het toe hulle laas na die eerste plek waaraan Hermione kon dink, ge-Appareer het nie; hoe die Doodseters hulle binne minute opgespoor het. Was dit Legilimensie? Het Voldemort of sy trawante toe geweet, en weet hulle nou, waarheen Hermione hulle geneem het?

"Dink jy ons moet spore maak?" vra Ron vir Hermione en Harry kan aan Ron se gesig sien hy wonder oor dieselfde ding.

"Ek weet nie."

Ron lyk nog steeds bleek en sweterig. Hy probeer glad nie eens regop sit nie en dit lyk asof hy te swak is daarvoor. Dit sal baie moeilik wees om hom in hierdie toestand te vervoer.

"Kom ons bly vir eers hier," sê Harry.

Hermione lyk verlig en staan vinnig op.

"Waarnatoe gaan jy?" vra Ron.

"As ons hier wil bly, moet ons 'n paar beskermende paljasse om die plek sit," antwoord sy. Sy lig haar towerstaf en begin in 'n wye sirkel om Harry en Ron loop terwyl sy inkantasies prewel. Harry sien subtiele veranderings in die lug om hulle: dit is asof Hermione 'n hitteskerm om hulle oopte optower.

"*Salvia hexia . . . Protego totalum . . . Repello Moggeltum . . . Muffliato* . . . Haal solank die tent uit, Harry . . ."

"Tent?"

"In die sakkie!"

"In die . . . natuurlik," sê Harry.

Hierdie keer sukkel hy nie om binne-in rond te krap nie; hy gebruik nog 'n Ontbiedtowerspreuk. Die tent verskyn in 'n opgebondelde massa seil, tou en pale. Harry herken dit, deels as gevolg van die reuk van katte, as dieselfde tent waarin hulle die nag van die Kwiddiek-wêreldbeker geslaap het.

"Ek dog dit behoort aan daai Perkins-ou van die Ministerie?" vra hy en begin die tentpenne uit die bondel los te wikkel.

"Blykbaar wou hy dit nie terughê nie; hy kry te erg rugpyn," sê Hermione, wat nou ingewikkelde syfer agt-bewegings met haar towerstaf maak, "toe het Ron se pa gesê ek kan dit maar leen. *Erecto!*" voeg sy by en rig haar towerstaf op die misvormde bondel tentseil wat met een vloeiende beweging in die lug opstyg en dan ten volle opgeslaan voor 'n verbaasde Harry op die grond te lande kom; 'n tentpen vlieg uit sy hande en beland met 'n laaste doef aan die einde van 'n ankertou.

"*Cave inimicum,*" sluit Hermione af met 'n sierlike lugwaartse swaai. "Dit is soveel as wat ek kan doen. Ons sal ten minste darem weet wanneer hulle kom. Ek kan nie waarborg dit sal Vol–"

"Moenie daai naam sê nie!" stop Ron haar met 'n skerp stem.

Harry en Hermione kyk na mekaar.

"Ekskuus," sê Ron en kreun effens toe hy homself oplig om na hulle te kyk, "maar dit voel soos 'n – 'n vloek of iets. Kom ons noem hom Jy-Weet-Wie – asseblief."

"Dumbledore het gesê vrees vir 'n naam –" begin Harry.

"Ingeval jy nog nie agtergekom het nie, pel, dit het Dumbledore op die ou end nie juis gehelp om Jy-Weet-Wie op sy naam te noem nie," kap Ron terug. "Bewys – bewys net vir Jy-Weet-Wie 'n bietjie respek, oukei?"

"*Respek?*" herhaal Harry, maar Hermione gee vinnig vir hom 'n

waarskuwende kyk; blykbaar moet hy nie met Ron argumenteer terwyl laasgenoemde in so 'n verswakte toestand is nie.

Harry en Hermione sleepdra Ron by die tent in. Die binnekant is presies soos Harry dit onthou: 'n woonstelletjie, volledig met 'n badkamer en kombuisie. Hy skuif 'n ou leunstoel eenkant toe en laat sak Ron versigtig tot op die onderste slaapbank van 'n dubbeldekkerbed. Selfs hierdie baie kort entjie het Ron nog witter laat word en toe hulle hom op die matras gemaklik gemaak het, maak hy sy oë weer toe en praat 'n ruk lank nie.

"Ek maak vir ons tee," sê Hermione uitasem. Sy haal die ketel en bekers uit die dieptes van haar sakkie en mik kombuis toe.

Die warm drankie is vir Harry so welkom soos die Vuurwhisky die aand toe Maloog dood is; dit voel of dit 'n bietjie van die fladderende vrees in sy borskas wegbrand. Ná 'n minuut of twee verbreek Ron die stilte.

"Wat dink julle het met die Cattermoles gebeur?"

"Met 'n bietjie geluk behoort hulle weg te gekom het," sê Hermione, wat haar warm beker styf vashou vir vertroosting. "As meneer Cattermole kopgehou het, sou hy mevrou Cattermole met Sy-aan-Sy Apparering daar weggekry het en vlug hulle op hierdie oomblik met hulle kinders landuit. Dis wat Harry vir haar gesê het om te doen."

"Demmit, ek hoop hulle't ontsnap," sê Ron en leun terug teen sy kussings. Die tee doen hom blykbaar goed; hy het weer 'n bietjie kleur in sy gesig. "Maar aan die manier waarop almal met my gepraat het toe ek hy was, het ek die gevoel gekry Reg Cattermole is nie te skerpsinnig nie. Magtig, ek hoop hulle't dit gemaak . . . As hulle al twee in Azkaban beland oor ons . . ."

Harry kyk na Hermione en die vraag wat hy op die punt was om te vra – of mevrou Cattermole se gebrek aan 'n towerstaf dit vir haar onmoontlik sou maak om aan haar man se sy te Appareer – sterf in sy keel. Hermione staar na Ron wat hom oor die Cattermoles se lot verknies en daar is soveel teerheid op haar gesig dat Harry amper voel asof hy haar verras het terwyl sy besig was om Ron te soen.

"So, het jy dit?" vra Harry vir haar, deels om haar te herinner dat hy hier is.

"Het – het ek wat?" vra sy en skrik effens.

"Waarvoor is ons nou net deur alles? Die hangertjie! Waar's die hangertjie?"

"Julle't dit gekry?" roep Ron uit en lig homself 'n entjie hoër teen sy kussings op. "Niemand vertel my iets nie! Demmit, julle kon dit darem net genoem het!"

"Wel, ons het vir ons lewe gevlug van die Doodseters af," sê Hermione. "Hier."

En sy haal die hangertjie uit haar kleed en gee dit vir Ron.

Dit is so groot soos 'n hoendereier. 'n Swierige letter "S" geset met baie groen steentjies glinster dof in die gedempte lig wat deur die tent se seildak skyn.

"Enige kans dat iemand dit vernietig het sedert Skepsel dit gehad het?" vra Ron hoopvol. "Ek bedoel, is ons seker dis nog 'n Horcrux?"

"Ek dink so," sê Hermione wat dit by hom terugvat en noukeurig bekyk. "Daar sal een of ander teken van skade wees as dit met towerkrag vernietig is."

Sy gee dit aan vir Harry wat dit in sy vingers omdraai. Die ding lyk perfek en onbeskadig. Hy onthou die verrinneweerde oorblyfsels van die dagboek en hoe die steen in die Horcrux-ring oopgekraak het toe Dumbledore dit vernietig het.

"Ek dink Skepsel is reg," sê Harry. "Ons sal moet uitwerk hoe om hierdie ding oop te maak voor ons dit kan vernietig."

'n Skielike besef van wat hy vashou, van wat agter die klein goue deurtjies lewe, tref Harry terwyl hy praat. Selfs ná al hulle moeite om dit te kry, voel hy 'n geweldige drang om die hangertjie van hom af weg te slinger. Weer onder beheer, probeer hy die hangertjie met sy vingers oopkry en probeer dan die towerspreuk wat Hermione gebruik het om Regulus se kamerdeur oop te maak. Niks werk nie. Hy gee die hangertjie terug vir Ron en Hermione; elkeen van hulle doen hulle bes, maar behaal niks meer sukses as hy om dit oop te kry nie.

"Maar kan julle dit voel?" vra Ron gedemp terwyl hy dit styf in sy gebalde vuis vashou.

"Wat bedoel jy?"

Ron gee die Horcrux vir Harry. Ná 'n oomblik of twee dink Harry hy weet wat Ron bedoel. Is dit sy eie bloed wat hy deur sy are voel pomp of is dit iets wat binne-in die hangertjie soos 'n metaalhartjie klop?

"Wat gaan ons daarmee doen?" vra Hermione.

"Dit veilig hou tot ons uitgewerk het hoe om dit te vernietig," antwoord Harry en al wil hy nie, hang hy die ketting om sy nek en laat val die hangertjie uit die oog onder sy kleed in waar dit teen sy bors rus langs die sakkie wat Hagrid vir hom gegee het.

"Ek dink ons moet beurte maak om buite die tent wag te staan," voeg hy by vir Hermione terwyl hy opstaan en hom uitrek. "En ons sal ook aan kos moet dink. Jy bly hier," sê hy skerp toe Ron probeer regop sit en 'n nare skakering van groen word.

Met die Loerskoop wat Harry vir sy verjaardag by Hermione gekry het versigtig opgestel op die tafel in die tent, hou Harry en Hermione die res van die dag om die beurt wag. Die Loerskoop bly egter die hele dag stil en roerloos op sy punt; of dit nou is as gevolg van die beskermende paljasse en Moggelwerende towerspreuke wat Hermione om hulle opgestel het of omdat mense dit selde hier waag, hulle stukkie woud bly verlate afgesien van sporadiese voëls of eekhorings. Die aand bring geen verandering nie. Harry steek sy towerstaf aan toe hy tienuur plekke met Hermione ruil; hy kyk uit oor 'n verlate terrein en sien hoe fladder die vlermuise hoog bokant hom deur die enkele stukkie sterrehemel wat vanuit hulle beskermde oopte sigbaar is.

Hy is nou honger en effens lighoofdig. Hermione het nie kos in haar towerhandsak gepak nie, want sy het aanvaar hulle gaan die aand terug na Grimmauldplein toe, so hulle het niks om te eet nie behalwe 'n paar wilde sampioene wat Hermione tussen die naaste bome gaan oes en in 'n kampemmertjie opgekook het. Ron het ná 'n paar monde vol gelyk of hy mislik voel en sy porsie weggestoot; Harry het net volhard om nie Hermione se gevoelens seer te maak nie.

Die omringende stilte word nou en dan verbreek deur 'n geritsel en wat klink na takkies wat breek: Harry dink dit word veroorsaak deur diere eerder as mense, maar hy hou sy towerstaf nogtans gereed. Sy ingewande, wat alreeds ongemaklik voel van die onvoldoende porsie rubberige sampioene, kriewel onrustig.

Hy het gedink hy sal verheug wees as hulle dit regkry om die Horcrux terug te steel, maar om die een of ander rede voel hy nie so nie; al wat hy voel terwyl hy uittuur na die duister waarvan sy towerstaf net 'n klein stukkie verlig, is kommer oor wat volgende gaan gebeur. Dit is asof hy weke, maande, miskien selfs jare lank op hierdie oomblik afgestuur het, maar nou skielik onverwags tot stilstand gekom het en nie meer weet waarheen volgende nie.

Daar is ander Horcruxe daarbuite iewers, maar hy het nie die vaagste benul waar hulle kan wees nie. Hy weet nie eens wat almal van hulle is nie. Intussen het hy ook nie 'n idee hoe om die enigste een wat hulle gekry het, die Horcrux wat nou teen sy kaal vel op sy borskas lê, te vernietig nie. Vreemd genoeg het dit nog nie hitte van sy liggaam geabsorbeer nie; dit lê so koud teen sy vel asof dit uit ysige water kom. Van tyd tot tyd, dink Harry, of miskien verbeel hy hom, kan hy die sagte hartklop onreëlmatig naas sy eie voel.

Naamlose voorbodes bekruip hom terwyl hy hier in die donker sit; hy probeer hom daarteen verset, hulle van hom af wegstoot,

maar hulle val hom meedoënloos aan. *Nie een van die twee kan leef terwyl die ander een oorleef nie.* Ron en Hermione, wat nou sag agter hom in die tent gesels, kan omdraai as hulle wil; hy kan nie. En terwyl hy hier sit en probeer om sy eie vrees en uitputting baas te raak, voel dit vir Harry of die Horcrux teen sy bors die tyd wat hy oorhet, aftik . . . *Simpelgeid,* sê hy vir homself, *moenie sulke goed dink nie* . . .

Sy litteken begin weer prik. Hy is bang hy laat dit gebeur omdat hy aan hierdie dinge dink en probeer om sy gedagtes in 'n ander rigting te stuur. Hy dink aan arme Skepsel wat hulle tuis verwag het en toe pleks daarvan vir Yaxley moes ontvang. Sal die elf stilbly, of sal hy vir die Doodseter alles vertel wat hy weet? Harry sou graag wou glo dat Skepsel die afgelope maand teenoor hom verander het, dat hy nou lojaal sal wees, maar wie weet wat kan gebeur? Sê nou die Doodseters martel die elf? Harry se kop wemel van siek beelde en hy probeer hulle ook wegstoot, want daar is niks wat hy vir Skepsel kan doen nie: hy en Hermione het reeds daarteen besluit om hom te ontbied, want wat as iemand van die Ministerie ook kom? Hulle kan nie daarop reken dat 'n elf se Apparering gevrywaar is van dieselfde defek wat Yaxley aan die soom van Hermione se mou na Grimmauldplein toe geneem het nie.

Harry se litteken brand nou. Hy dink hoe baie daar is wat hulle nie weet nie: Lupin was reg oor towerkrag wat hulle nog nooit teëgekom het of hulle kan voorstel nie. Hoekom het Dumbledore nie meer verduidelik nie? Het hy gedink daar is nog tyd daarvoor; dat hy nog jare, miskien eeue, lank sal lewe soos sy vriend Nicolas Flamel? Indien wel, was hy verkeerd . . . Snape het daarvoor gesorg . . . Snape, die slapende slang, wat bo-op die Toring toegeslaan het . . .

En toe val Dumbledore . . . en val . . .

"Gee dit vir my, Gregorovitch."

Harry se stem is hoog, helder en koud; 'n wit hand met lang vingers hou sy towerstaf voor hom vas. Die man op wie hy dit rig, hang onderstebo in die lug, al hou geen toue hom daar nie; hy swaai daar, onsigbaar en onheilspellend vasgebind, sy ledemate om hom gedraai, sy gesig angsbevange op dieselfde hoogte as Harry s'n, rooi van al die bloed wat na sy kop toe gebruis het. Hy het spierwit hare en 'n dik, ruie baard: 'n vasgebinde Kersvader.

"Ek het dit nie, ek het dit nie meer nie! Dit is baie jare gelede by my gesteel!"

"Moenie vir die heer Voldemort lieg nie, Gregorovitch. Hy weet . . . hy weet altyd."

Die hangende man se pupille is wyd oopgesper van vrees, en

hulle lyk of hulle swel, groter en groter, totdat hulle swartheid Harry heel insluk –

En nou beweeg Harry haastig in 'n donker gang af kort agter die gesette klein Gregorovitch aan wat 'n lantern in die lug hou. Gregorovitch bars by die vertrek aan die einde van die gang in en sy lantern verlig wat soos 'n werkswinkel lyk; houtsaagsels en goud glinster in die swaaiende ligkol, en daar op die vensterbank, soos 'n reusevoël, sit 'n jong man met goue hare. In die breukdeel van 'n sekonde dat die lanternlig op hom val, sien Harry die vreugde op sy aantreklike gesig, dan vuur die indringer 'n Bedwelmspreuk met sy towerstaf af en spring rats agtertoe by die venster uit terwyl hy kraai van die lag.

En Harry word teruggeslinger uit daardie wye, tonnelagtige pupille en Gregorovitch se gesig is vertrek van vrees.

"*Wie was die dief, Gregorovitch?*" sê die hoë, koue stem.

"*Ek weet nie, ek het nooit geweet nie, 'n jong man – nee – asseblief – ASSEBLIEF!*"

'n Gil hou aan en aan en dan flits daar 'n groen lig –

"*Harry!*"

Hy maak sy oë oop; hy hyg, sy voorkop klop. Hy het sy bewussyn teen die kant van die tent verloor, teen die seil afgegly en lê nou oopgespalk op die grond. Hy kyk op na Hermione wie se welige hare die klein stukkie lug wat deur die donker takke hoog bokant hulle sigbaar is, versper.

"Gedroom," sê hy en sit vinnig regop en probeer om Hermione se kwaai blik met 'n onskuldige een te beantwoord. "Moes ingesluimer het, jammer."

"Ek weet dit was jou litteken! Ek sien dit aan die uitdrukking op jou gesig! Jy was besig om in te kyk in Vol–"

"Moenie sy naam sê nie!" kom Ron se stem kwaai uit die dieptes van die tent.

"*Oukei* dan," kap Hermione terug. "In *Jy-Weet-Wie* se gedagtes!"

"Ek wou nie hê dit moes gebeur nie!" sê Harry. "Dit was 'n droom! Kan *jy* beheer waaroor jy droom, Hermione?"

"As jy net geleer het om Okklumensie toe te pas –"

Maar Harry is nie lus om berispe te word nie; hy wil praat oor wat hy nou net gesien het.

"Hy't Gregorovitch gevind, Hermione, en ek dink hy't hom doodgemaak, maar voor hy hom doodgemaak het, het hy Gregorovitch se gedagtes gelees en toe sien ek –"

"Ek dink ek moet liewer nou wagstaan as jy so moeg is dat jy aan die slaap raak," sê Hermione koud.

"Ek sal my wagbeurt klaarmaak!"

"Nee, jy is duidelik oormoeg. Gaan lê."

Sy sak hardkoppig in die tentopening neer. Harry is kwaad, maar wil 'n bakleiery vermy en gaan terug binnetoe.

Ron steek sy gesig, wat nog steeds bleek is, by die onderste slaapbank uit; Harry klim op die een bokant hom, gaan lê en kyk op na die donker seilplafon. Ná 'n rukkie praat Ron in 'n stem wat so laag is dat Hermione dit nie kan hoor waar sy by die ingang in 'n bondeltjie gehurk sit nie.

"Wat doen Jy-Weet-Wie?"

Harry trek sy oë op skrefies soos hy hard probeer om elke detail te onthou, dan fluister hy in die donker.

"Hy het Gregorovitch gekry. Hy het hom vasgebind en hom gemartel."

"Hoe's Gregorovitch veronderstel om vir hom 'n nuwe towerstaf te maak as hy vasgebind is?"

"Ek weet nie . . . Dis vreemd, nè?"

Harry maak sy oë toe en dink aan alles wat hy gesien en gehoor het. Hoe meer hy onthou, hoe minder maak dit sin . . . Voldemort het niks van Harry se towerstaf gesê nie, niks van die tweelingkerns nie, niks van Gregorovitch wat 'n nuwe en magtiger towerstaf moet maak wat Harry s'n kan verslaan nie . . .

"Hy wou iets by Gregorovitch hê," sê Harry met sy oë nog steeds styf toe. "Hy't gesê hy moet dit vir hom gee, maar Gregorovitch het gesê dis gesteel . . . en toe . . . toe . . ."

Hy onthou hoe hy, as Voldemort, deur Gregorovitch se oë ingeslinger is tot in sy herinneringe . . .

"Hy het Gregorovitch se gedagtes gelees. Ek het 'n jong ou op 'n vensterbank sien sit; hy het 'n vloek op Gregorovitch afgevuur en toe by die venster uitgespring. Hy het dit gesteel, hy het wat ook al dit is wat Jy-Weet-Wie wil hê, gesteel. En ek . . . ek dink ek het hom al iewers gesien . . ."

Harry wens hy kan die laggende seun se gesig net nog een keer vlugtig sien. Volgens Gregorovitch het die diefstal jare gelede plaasgevind. Hoekom het die jong dief so bekend gelyk?

Die geluide van die omliggende woud word binne-in die tent verdoof; al wat Harry kan hoor, is Ron se asemhaling. Ná 'n rukkie fluister Ron: "Kon jy nie sien wat die dief vashou nie?"

"Nee . . . Dit moes iets baie kleins gewees het."

"Harry?"

Die houtdwarslatte van Ron se bed kraak soos hy van posisie verander.

"Harry, dink jy Jy-Weet-Wie is agter iets anders aan om dit in 'n Horcrux te verander?"

"Ek weet nie," sê Harry stadig. "Miskien. Maar sal dit nie gevaarlik vir hom wees om nog een te maak nie? Het Hermione nie gesê hy het sy siel al klaar tot die uiterste toe gedryf nie?"

"Ja, maar miskien weet hy dit nie."

"Ja . . . miskien," sê Harry.

Hy was seker Voldemort het 'n manier gesoek om die probleem van die tweelingkerns te omseil, seker Voldemort het 'n oplossing by die ou towerstafmaker gesoek . . . maar hy het hom nogtans doodgemaak, blykbaar sonder om vir hom 'n enkele vraag oor towerstafkunde te vra.

Wat probeer Voldemort in die hande kry? Die Ministerie van Towerkuns en die towerwêreld is aan sy voete, maar hy is ver weg, verbete op soek na iets wat eens op 'n tyd aan Gregorovitch behoort het en toe deur 'n onbekende dief gesteel is. Waarom?

Harry kan die jong blondekop se gesig nog steeds sien: dit was vrolik en wild; daar was 'n Fred en George-erige houding van triomfantlike kattekwaad aan hom. Hy het soos 'n voël van die vensterbank af weggeduik, en Harry het hom al vantevore gesien, maar hy kan nie dink waar nie . . .

Met Gregorovitch dood, is die dief met die vrolike gesig die een wat in gevaar verkeer en Harry se gedagtes staan nou by hom stil terwyl Ron se gesnork van die onderste slaapbank af begin rammel en hy self ook weer stadig insluimer.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



THE GOBLIN'S REVENGE

Early next morning, before the other two were awake, Harry left the tent to search the woods around them for the oldest, most gnarled, and resilient-looking tree he could find. There in its shadow he buried Mad-Eye Moody's eye and marked the spot by gouging a small cross in the bark with his wand. It was not much, but Harry felt that Mad-Eye would have much preferred this to being stuck on Dolores Umbridge's door. Then he returned to the tent to wait for the others to wake, and discuss what they were going to do next.

Harry and Hermione felt that it was best not to stay anywhere too long, and Ron agreed, with the sole proviso that their next move took them within reach of a bacon sandwich. Hermione therefore removed

the enchantments she had placed around the clearing, while Harry and Ron obliterated all the marks and impressions on the ground that might show they had camped there. Then they Disapparated to the outskirts of a small market town.

Once they had pitched the tent in the shelter of a small copse of trees and surrounded it with freshly cast defensive enchantments, Harry ventured out under the Invisibility Cloak to find sustenance. This, however, did not go as planned. He had barely entered the town when an unnatural chill, a descending mist, and a sudden darkening of the skies made him freeze where he stood.

"But you can make a brilliant Patronus!" protested Ron, when Harry arrived back at the tent empty-handed, out of breath, and mouthing the single word, *dementors*.

"I couldn't . . . make one," he panted, clutching the stitch in his side. "Wouldn't . . . come."

Their expressions of consternation and disappointment made Harry feel ashamed. It had been a nightmarish experience, seeing the dementors gliding out of the mist in the distance and realizing, as the paralyzing cold choked his lungs and a distant screaming filled his ears, that he was not going to be able to protect himself. It had taken all Harry's willpower to uproot himself from the spot and run, leaving the eyeless dementors to glide amongst the Muggles who might not be able to see them, but would assuredly feel the despair they cast wherever they went.

"So we still haven't got any food."

"Shut up, Ron," snapped Hermione. "Harry, what happened? Why do you think you couldn't make your Patronus? You managed

perfectly yesterday!"

"I don't know."

He sat low in one of Perkins's old armchairs, feeling more humiliated by the moment. He was afraid that something had gone wrong inside him. Yesterday seemed a long time ago: Today he might have been thirteen years old again, the only one who collapsed on the Hogwarts Express.

Ron kicked a chair leg.

"What?" he snarled at Hermione. "I'm starving! All I've had since I bled half to death is a couple of toadstools!"

"You go and fight your way through the dementors, then," said Harry, stung.

"I would, but my arm's in a sling, in case you hadn't noticed!"

"That's convenient."

"And what's that supposed to — ?"

"Of course!" cried Hermione, clapping a hand to her forehead and startling both of them into silence. "Harry, give me the locket! Come on," she said impatiently, clicking her fingers at him when he did not react, "the Horcrux, Harry, you're still wearing it!"

She held out her hands, and Harry lifted the golden chain over his head. The moment it parted contact with Harry's skin he felt free and oddly light. He had not even realized that he was clammy or that there was a heavy weight pressing on his stomach until both sensations lifted.

"Better?" asked Hermione.

"Yeah, loads better!"

"Harry," she said, crouching down in front of him and using the

kind of voice he associated with visiting the very sick, "you don't think you've been possessed, do you?"

"What? No!" he said defensively. "I remember everything we've done while I've been wearing it. I wouldn't know what I'd done if I'd been possessed, would I? Ginny told me there were times when she couldn't remember anything."

"Hmm," said Hermione, looking down at the heavy gold locket. "Well, maybe we ought not to wear it. We can just keep it in the tent."

"We are not leaving that Horcrux lying around," Harry stated firmly. "If we lose it, if it gets stolen —"

"Oh, all right, all right," said Hermione, and she placed it around her own neck and tucked it out of sight down the front of her shirt. "But we'll take turns wearing it, so nobody keeps it on too long."

"Great," said Ron irritably, "and now we've sorted that out, can we please get some food?"

"Fine, but we'll go somewhere else to find it," said Hermione with half a glance at Harry. "There's no point staying where we know dementors are swooping around."

In the end they settled down for the night in a far-flung field belonging to a lonely farm, from which they had managed to obtain eggs and bread.

"It's not stealing, is it?" asked Hermione in a troubled voice, as they devoured scrambled eggs on toast. "Not if I left some money under the chicken coop?"

Ron rolled his eyes and said, with his cheeks bulging, "'Er-my-nee, 'oo worry 'oo much. 'Elax!"

And, indeed, it was much easier to relax when they were

comfortably well fed: The argument about the dementors was forgotten in laughter that night, and Harry felt cheerful, even hopeful, as he took the first of the three night watches.

This was their first encounter with the fact that a full stomach meant good spirits; an empty one, bickering and gloom. Harry was least surprised by this, because he had suffered periods of near starvation at the Dursleys'. Hermione bore up reasonably well on those nights when they managed to scavenge nothing but berries or stale biscuits, her temper perhaps a little shorter than usual and her silences rather dour. Ron, however, had always been used to three delicious meals a day, courtesy of his mother or of the Hogwarts house-elves, and hunger made him both unreasonable and irascible. Whenever lack of food coincided with Ron's turn to wear the Horcrux, he became downright unpleasant.

"So where next?" was his constant refrain. He did not seem to have any ideas himself, but expected Harry and Hermione to come up with plans while he sat and brooded over the low food supplies. Accordingly Harry and Hermione spent fruitless hours trying to decide where they might find the other Horcruxes, and how to destroy the one they had already got, their conversations becoming increasingly repetitive as they had no new information.

As Dumbledore had told Harry that he believed Voldemort had hidden the Horcruxes in places important to him, they kept reciting, in a sort of dreary litany, those locations they knew that Voldemort had lived or visited. The orphanage where he had been born and raised; Hogwarts, where he had been educated; Borgin and Burkes, where he had worked after completing school; then Albania, where he had

spent his years of exile: These formed the basis of their speculations.

"Yeah, let's go to Albania. Shouldn't take more than an afternoon to search an entire country," said Ron sarcastically.

"There can't be anything there. He'd already made five of his Horcruxes before he went into exile, and Dumbledore was certain the snake is the sixth," said Hermione. "We know the snake's not in Albania, it's usually with Vol —"

"Didn't I ask you to stop saying that?"

"Fine! The snake is usually with *You-Know-Who* — happy?"

"Not particularly."

"I can't see him hiding anything at Borgin and Burkes," said Harry, who had made this point many times before, but said it again simply to break the nasty silence. "Borgin and Burke were experts at Dark objects, they would've recognized a Horcrux straightaway."

Ron yawned pointedly. Repressing a strong urge to throw something at him, Harry plowed on, "I still reckon he might have hidden something at Hogwarts."

Hermione sighed.

"But Dumbledore would have found it, Harry!"

Harry repeated the argument he kept bringing out in favor of this theory.

"Dumbledore said in front of me that he never assumed he knew all of Hogwarts's secrets. I'm telling you, if there was one place Vol —"

"Oi!"

"YOU-KNOW-WHO, then!" Harry shouted, goaded past endurance. "If there was one place that was really important to You-

Know-Who, it was Hogwarts!"

"Oh, come on," scoffed Ron. "His *school*?"

"Yeah, his school! It was his first real home, the place that meant he was special; it meant everything to him, and even after he left —"

"This is You-Know-Who we're talking about, right? Not you?" inquired Ron. He was tugging at the chain of the Horcrux around his neck: Harry was visited by a desire to seize it and throttle him.

"You told us that You-Know-Who asked Dumbledore to give him a job after he left," said Hermione.

"That's right," said Harry.

"And Dumbledore thought he only wanted to come back to try and find something, probably another founder's object, to make into another Horcrux?"

"Yeah," said Harry.

"But he didn't get the job, did he?" said Hermione. "So he never got the chance to find a founder's object there and hide it in the school!"

"Okay, then," said Harry, defeated. "Forget Hogwarts."

Without any other leads, they traveled into London and, hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, searched for the orphanage in which Voldemort had been raised. Hermione stole into a library and discovered from their records that the place had been demolished many years before. They visited its site and found a tower block of offices.

"We could try digging in the foundations?" Hermione suggested halfheartedly.

"He wouldn't have hidden a Horcrux here," Harry said. He had

known it all along: The orphanage had been the place Voldemort had been determined to escape; he would never have hidden a part of his soul there. Dumbledore had shown Harry that Voldemort sought grandeur or mystique in his hiding places; this dismal gray corner of London was as far removed as you could imagine from Hogwarts or the Ministry or a building like Gringotts, the Wizarding bank, with its golden doors and marble floors.

Even without any new ideas, they continued to move through the countryside, pitching the tent in a different place each night for security. Every morning they made sure that they had removed all clues to their presence, then set off to find another lonely and secluded spot, traveling by Apparition to more woods, to the shadowy crevices of cliffs, to purple moors, gorse-covered mountainsides, and once a sheltered and pebbly cove. Every twelve hours or so they passed the Horcrux between them as though they were playing some perverse, slow-motion game of pass-the-parcel, where they dreaded the music stopping because the reward was twelve hours of increased fear and anxiety.

Harry's scar kept prickling. It happened most often, he noticed, when he was wearing the Horcrux. Sometimes he could not stop himself reacting to the pain.

"What? What did you see?" demanded Ron, whenever he noticed Harry wince.

"A face," muttered Harry, every time. "The same face. The thief who stole from Gregorovitch."

And Ron would turn away, making no effort to hide his disappointment. Harry knew that Ron was hoping to hear news of his

family or of the rest of the Order of the Phoenix, but after all, he, Harry, was not a television aerial; he could only see what Voldemort was thinking at the time, not tune in to whatever took his fancy. Apparently Voldemort was dwelling endlessly on the unknown youth with the gleeful face, whose name and whereabouts, Harry felt sure, Voldemort knew no better than he did. As Harry's scar continued to burn and the merry, blond-haired boy swam tantalizingly in his memory, he learned to suppress any sign of pain or discomfort, for the other two showed nothing but impatience at the mention of the thief. He could not entirely blame them, when they were so desperate for a lead on the Horcruxes.

As the days stretched into weeks, Harry began to suspect that Ron and Hermione were having conversations without, and about, him. Several times they stopped talking abruptly when Harry entered the tent, and twice he came accidentally upon them, huddled a little distance away, heads together and talking fast; both times they fell silent when they realized he was approaching them and hastened to appear busy collecting wood or water.

Harry could not help wondering whether they had only agreed to come on what now felt like a pointless and rambling journey because they thought he had some secret plan that they would learn in due course. Ron was making no effort to hide his bad mood, and Harry was starting to fear that Hermione too was disappointed by his poor leadership. In desperation he tried to think of further Horcrux locations, but the only one that continued to occur to him was Hogwarts, and as neither of the others thought this at all likely, he stopped suggesting it.

Autumn rolled over the countryside as they moved through it: They were now pitching the tent on mulches of fallen leaves. Natural mists joined those cast by the dementors; wind and rain added to their troubles. The fact that Hermione was getting better at identifying edible fungi could not altogether compensate for their continuing isolation, the lack of other people's company, or their total ignorance of what was going on in the war against Voldemort.

"My mother," said Ron one night, as they sat in the tent on a riverbank in Wales, "can make good food appear out of thin air."

He prodded moodily at the lumps of charred gray fish on his plate. Harry glanced automatically at Ron's neck and saw, as he had expected, the golden chain of the Horcrux glinting there. He managed to fight down the impulse to swear at Ron, whose attitude would, he knew, improve slightly when the time came to take off the locket.

"Your mother can't produce food out of thin air," said Hermione. "No one can. Food is the first of the five Principal Exceptions to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfigur —"

"Oh, speak English, can't you?" Ron said, prising a fish bone out from between his teeth.

"It's impossible to make good food out of nothing! You can Summon it if you know where it is, you can transform it, you can increase the quantity if you've already got some —"

"Well, don't bother increasing this, it's disgusting," said Ron.

"Harry caught the fish and I did my best with it! I notice I'm always the one who ends up sorting out the food, because I'm a *girl*, I suppose!"

"No, it's because you're supposed to be the best at magic!" shot

back Ron.

Hermione jumped up and bits of roast pike slid off her tin plate onto the floor.

"*You* can do the cooking tomorrow, Ron, *you* can find the ingredients and try and charm them into something worth eating, and I'll sit here and pull faces and moan and you can see how you —"

"Shut up!" said Harry, leaping to his feet and holding up both hands. "Shut up *now*!"

Hermione looked outraged.

"How can you side with him, he hardly ever does the cook —"

"Hermione, be quiet, I can hear someone!"

He was listening hard, his hands still raised, warning them not to talk. Then, over the rush and gush of the dark river beside them, he heard voices again. He looked around at the Sneakoscope. It was not moving.

"You cast the Muffliato charm over us, right?" he whispered to Hermione.

"I did everything," she whispered back, "Muffliato, Muggle-Repelling and Disillusionment Charms, all of it. They shouldn't be able to hear or see us, whoever they are."

Heavy scuffing and scraping noises, plus the sound of dislodged stones and twigs, told them that several people were clambering down the steep, wooded slope that descended to the narrow bank where they had pitched the tent. They drew their wands, waiting. The enchantments they had cast around themselves ought to be sufficient, in the near total darkness, to shield them from the notice of Muggles and normal witches and wizards. If these were Death Eaters, then

perhaps their defenses were about to be tested by Dark Magic for the first time.

The voices became louder but no more intelligible as the group of men reached the bank. Harry estimated that their owners were fewer than twenty feet away, but the cascading river made it impossible to tell for sure. Hermione snatched up the beaded bag and started to rummage; after a moment she drew out three Extendable Ears and threw one each to Harry and Ron, who hastily inserted the ends of the flesh-colored strings into their ears and fed the other ends out of the tent entrance.

Within seconds Harry heard a weary male voice.

“There ought to be a few salmon in here, or d’you reckon it’s too early in the season? *Accio Salmon*!”

There were several distinct splashes and then the slapping sounds of fish against flesh. Somebody grunted appreciatively. Harry pressed the Extendable Ear deeper into his own: Over the murmur of the river he could make out more voices, but they were not speaking English or any human language he had ever heard. It was a rough and unmelodious tongue, a string of rattling, guttural noises, and there seemed to be two speakers, one with a slightly lower, slower voice than the other.

A fire danced into life on the other side of the canvas; large shadows passed between tent and flames. The delicious smell of baking salmon wafted tantalizingly in their direction. Then came the clinking of cutlery on plates, and the first man spoke again.

“Here, Griphook, Gornuk.”

Goblins! Hermione mouthed at Harry, who nodded.

"Thank you," said the goblins together in English.

"So, you three have been on the run how long?" asked a new, mellow, and pleasant voice; it was vaguely familiar to Harry, who pictured a round-bellied, cheerful-faced man.

"Six weeks . . . seven . . . I forget," said the tired man. "Met up with Griphook in the first couple of days and joined forces with Gornuk not long after. Nice to have a bit of company." There was a pause, while knives scraped plates and tin mugs were picked up and replaced on the ground. "What made you leave, Ted?" continued the man.

"Knew they were coming for me," replied mellow-voiced Ted, and Harry suddenly knew who he was: Tonks's father. "Heard Death Eaters were in the area last week and decided I'd better run for it. Refused to register as a Muggle-born on principle, see, so I knew it was a matter of time, knew I'd have to leave in the end. My wife should be okay, she's pure-blood. And then I met Dean here, what, a few days ago, son?"

"Yeah," said another voice, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at each other, silent but beside themselves with excitement, sure they recognized the voice of Dean Thomas, their fellow Gryffindor.

"Muggle-born, eh?" asked the first man.

"Not sure," said Dean. "My dad left my mum when I was a kid. I've got no proof he was a wizard, though."

There was silence for a while, except for the sounds of munching; then Ted spoke again.

"I've got to say, Dirk, I'm surprised to run into you. Pleased, but surprised. Word was you'd been caught."

"I was," said Dirk. "I was halfway to Azkaban when I made a break for it, Stunned Dawlish, and nicked his broom. It was easier than you'd think; I don't reckon he's quite right at the moment. Might be Confunded. If so, I'd like to shake the hand of the witch or wizard who did it, probably saved my life."

There was another pause in which the fire crackled and the river rushed on. Then Ted said, "And where do you two fit in? I, er, had the impression the goblins were for You-Know-Who, on the whole."

"You had a false impression," said the higher-voiced of the goblins. "We take no sides. This is a wizards' war."

"How come you're in hiding, then?"

"I deemed it prudent," said the deeper-voiced goblin. "Having refused what I considered an impertinent request, I could see that my personal safety was in jeopardy."

"What did they ask you to do?" asked Ted.

"Duties ill-befitting the dignity of my race," replied the goblin, his voice rougher and less human as he said it. "I am not a house-elf."

"What about you, Griphook?"

"Similar reasons," said the higher-voiced goblin. "Gringotts is no longer under the sole control of my race. I recognize no Wizarding master."

He added something under his breath in Gobbledegook, and Gornuk laughed.

"What's the joke?" asked Dean.

"He said," replied Dirk, "that there are things wizards don't recognize, either."

There was a short pause.

"I don't get it," said Dean.

"I had my small revenge before I left," said Griphook in English.

"Good man — goblin, I should say," amended Ted hastily. "Didn't manage to lock a Death Eater up in one of the old high-security vaults, I suppose?"

"If I had, the sword would not have helped him break out," replied Griphook. Gornuk laughed again and even Dirk gave a dry chuckle.

"Dean and I are still missing something here," said Ted.

"So is Severus Snape, though he does not know it," said Griphook, and the two goblins roared with malicious laughter. Inside the tent Harry's breathing was shallow with excitement: He and Hermione stared at each other, listening as hard as they could.

"Didn't you hear about that, Ted?" asked Dirk. "About the kids who tried to steal Gryffindor's sword out of Snape's office at Hogwarts?"

An electric current seemed to course through Harry, jangling his every nerve as he stood rooted to the spot.

"Never heard a word," said Ted. "Not in the *Prophet,* was it?"

"Hardly," chortled Dirk. "Griphook here told me, he heard about it from Bill Weasley who works for the bank. One of the kids who tried to take the sword was Bill's younger sister."

Harry glanced toward Hermione and Ron, both of whom were clutching the Extendable Ears as tightly as lifelines.

"She and a couple of friends got into Snape's office and smashed open the glass case where he was apparently keeping the sword. Snape caught them as they were trying to smuggle it down the staircase."

"Ah, God bless 'em," said Ted. "What did they think, that they'd be able to use the sword on You-Know-Who? Or on Snape himself?"

"Well, whatever they thought they were going to do with it, Snape decided the sword wasn't safe where it was," said Dirk. "Couple of days later, once he'd got the say-so from You-Know-Who, I imagine, he sent it down to London to be kept in Gringotts instead."

The goblins started to laugh again.

"I'm still not seeing the joke," said Ted.

"It's a fake," rasped Griphook.

"The sword of Gryffindor!"

"Oh yes. It is a copy — an excellent copy, it is true — but it was Wizard-made. The original was forged centuries ago by goblins and had certain properties only goblin-made armor possesses. Wherever the genuine sword of Gryffindor is, it is not in a vault at Gringotts bank."

"I see," said Ted. "And I take it you didn't bother telling the Death Eaters this?"

"I saw no reason to trouble them with the information," said Griphook smugly, and now Ted and Dean joined in Gornuk and Dirk's laughter.

Inside the tent, Harry closed his eyes, willing someone to ask the question he needed answered, and after a minute that seemed ten, Dean obliged; he was (Harry remembered with a jolt) an ex-boyfriend of Ginny's too.

"What happened to Ginny and the others? The ones who tried to steal it?"

"Oh, they were punished, and cruelly," said Griphook

indifferently.

"They're okay, though?" asked Ted quickly. "I mean, the Weasleys don't need any more of their kids injured, do they?"

"They suffered no serious injury, as far as I am aware," said Griphook.

"Lucky for them," said Ted. "With Snape's track record I suppose we should just be glad they're still alive."

"You believe that story, then, do you, Ted?" asked Dirk. "You believe Snape killed Dumbledore?"

"'Course I do," said Ted. "You're not going to sit there and tell me you think Potter had anything to do with it?"

"Hard to know what to believe these days," muttered Dirk.

"I know Harry Potter," said Dean. "And I reckon he's the real thing — the Chosen One, or whatever you want to call it."

"Yeah, there's a lot would like to believe he's that, son," said Dirk, "me included. But where is he? Run for it, by the looks of things. You'd think, if he knew anything we don't, or had anything special going for him, he'd be out there now fighting, rallying resistance, instead of hiding. And you know, the *Prophet* made a pretty good case against him —"

"The *Prophet*?" scoffed Ted. "You deserve to be lied to if you're still reading that muck, Dirk. You want the facts, try the *Quibbler*."

There was a sudden explosion of choking and retching, plus a good deal of thumping; by the sound of it, Dirk had swallowed a fish bone. At last he spluttered, "The *Quibbler*? That lunatic rag of Xeno Lovegood's?"

"It's not so lunatic these days," said Ted. "You want to give it a

look. Xeno is printing all the stuff the *Prophet*'s ignoring, not a single mention of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks in the last issue. How long they'll let him get away with it, mind, I don't know. But Xeno says, front page of every issue, that any wizard who's against You-Know-Who ought to make helping Harry Potter their number-one priority."

"Hard to help a boy who's vanished off the face of the earth," said Dirk.

"Listen, the fact that they haven't caught him yet's one hell of an achievement," said Ted. "I'd take tips from him gladly; it's what we're trying to do, stay free, isn't it?"

"Yeah, well, you've got a point there," said Dirk heavily. "With the whole of the Ministry and all their informers looking for him I'd have expected him to be caught by now. Mind, who's to say they haven't already caught and killed him without publicizing it?"

"Ah, don't say that, Dirk," murmured Ted.

There was a long pause filled with more clattering of knives and forks. When they spoke again it was to discuss whether they ought to sleep on the bank or retreat back up the wooded slope. Deciding the trees would give better cover, they extinguished their fire, then clambered back up the incline, their voices fading away.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione reeled in the Extendable Ears. Harry, who had found the need to remain silent increasingly difficult the longer they eavesdropped, now found himself unable to say more than, "Ginny — the sword —"

"I know!" said Hermione.

She lunged for the tiny beaded bag, this time sinking her arm in it right up to the armpit.

"Here . . . we . . . are . . ." she said between gritted teeth, and she pulled at something that was evidently in the depths of the bag. Slowly the edge of an ornate picture frame came into sight. Harry hurried to help her. As they lifted the empty portrait of Phineas Nigellus free of Hermione's bag, she kept her wand pointing at it, ready to cast a spell at any moment.

"If somebody swapped the real sword for the fake while it was in Dumbledore's office," she panted, as they propped the painting against the side of the tent, "Phineas Nigellus would have seen it happen, he hangs right beside the case!"

"Unless he was asleep," said Harry, but he still held his breath as Hermione knelt down in front of the empty canvas, her wand directed at its center, cleared her throat, then said:

"Er — Phineas? Phineas Nigellus?"

Nothing happened.

"Phineas Nigellus?" said Hermione again. "Professor Black? Please could we talk to you? Please?"

"'Please' always helps," said a cold, snide voice, and Phineas Nigellus slid into his portrait. At once, Hermione cried:

"Obscuro!"

A black blindfold appeared over Phineas Nigellus's clever, dark eyes, causing him to bump into the frame and shriek with pain.

"What — how dare — what are you — ?"

"I'm very sorry, Professor Black," said Hermione, "but it's a necessary precaution!"

"Remove this foul addition at once! Remove it, I say! You are ruining a great work of art! Where am I? What is going on?"

"Never mind where we are," said Harry, and Phineas Nigellus froze, abandoning his attempts to peel off the painted blindfold.

"Can that possibly be the voice of the elusive Mr. Potter?"

"Maybe," said Harry, knowing that this would keep Phineas Nigellus's interest. "We've got a couple of questions to ask you — about the sword of Gryffindor."

"Ah," said Phineas Nigellus, now turning his head this way and that in an effort to catch sight of Harry, "yes. That silly girl acted most unwisely there —"

"Shut up about my sister," said Ron roughly. Phineas Nigellus raised supercilious eyebrows.

"Who else is here?" he asked, turning his head from side to side. "Your tone displeases me! The girl and her friends were foolhardy in the extreme. Thieving from the headmaster!"

"They weren't thieving," said Harry. "That sword isn't Snape's."

"It belongs to Professor Snape's school," said Phineas Nigellus. "Exactly what claim did the Weasley girl have upon it? She deserved her punishment, as did the idiot Longbottom and the Lovegood oddity!"

"Neville is not an idiot and Luna is not an oddity!" said Hermione.

"Where am I?" repeated Phineas Nigellus, starting to wrestle with the blindfold again. "Where have you brought me? Why have you removed me from the house of my forebears?"

"Never mind that! How did Snape punish Ginny, Neville, and Luna?" asked Harry urgently.

"*Professor* Snape sent them into the Forbidden Forest, to do some work for the oaf, Hagrid."

"Hagrid's not an oaf!" said Hermione shrilly.

"And Snape might've thought that was a punishment," said Harry, "but Ginny, Neville, and Luna probably had a good laugh with Hagrid. The Forbidden Forest . . . they've faced plenty worse than the Forbidden Forest, big deal!"

He felt relieved; he had been imagining horrors, the Cruciatus Curse at the very least.

"What we really wanted to know, Professor Black, is whether anyone else has, um, taken out the sword at all? Maybe it's been taken away for cleaning or — or something?"

Phineas Nigellus paused again in his struggles to free his eyes and sniggered.

"*Muggle-borns,*" he said. "Goblin-made armor does not require cleaning, simple girl. Goblins' silver repels mundane dirt, imbibing only that which strengthens it."

"Don't call Hermione simple," said Harry.

"I grow weary of contradiction," said Phineas Nigellus. "Perhaps it is time for me to return to the headmaster's office?"

Still blindfolded, he began groping the side of his frame, trying to feel his way out of his picture and back into the one at Hogwarts. Harry had a sudden inspiration.

"Dumbledore! Can't you bring us Dumbledore?"

"I beg your pardon?" asked Phineas Nigellus.

"Professor Dumbledore's portrait — couldn't you bring him along, here, into yours?"

Phineas Nigellus turned his face in the direction of Harry's voice.

"Evidently it is not only Muggle-borns who are ignorant, Potter.

The portraits of Hogwarts may commune with each other, but they cannot travel outside the castle except to visit a painting of themselves hanging elsewhere. Dumbledore cannot come here with me, and after the treatment I have received at your hands, I can assure you that I shall not be making a return visit!"

Slightly crestfallen, Harry watched Phineas redouble his attempts to leave his frame.

"Professor Black," said Hermione, "couldn't you just tell us, *please*, when was the last time the sword was taken out of its case? Before Ginny took it out, I mean?"

Phineas snorted impatiently.

"I believe that the last time I saw the sword of Gryffindor leave its case was when Professor Dumbledore used it to break open a ring."

Hermione whipped around to look at Harry. Neither of them dared say more in front of Phineas Nigellus, who had at last managed to locate the exit.

"Well, good night to you," he said a little waspishly, and he began to move out of sight again. Only the edge of his hat brim remained in view when Harry gave a sudden shout.

"Wait! Have you told Snape you saw this?"

Phineas Nigellus stuck his blindfolded head back into the picture.

"Professor Snape has more important things on his mind than the many eccentricities of Albus Dumbledore. *Good-bye*, Potter!"

And with that, he vanished completely, leaving behind him nothing but his murky backdrop.

"Harry!" Hermione cried.

"I know!" Harry shouted. Unable to contain himself, he punched

the air; it was more than he had dared to hope for. He strode up and down the tent, feeling that he could have run a mile; he did not even feel hungry anymore. Hermione was squashing Phineas Nigellus's portrait back into the beaded bag; when she had fastened the clasp she threw the bag aside and raised a shining face to Harry.

"The sword can destroy Horcruxes! Goblin-made blades imbibe only that which strengthen them — Harry, that sword's impregnated with basilisk venom!"

"And Dumbledore didn't give it to me because he still needed it, he wanted to use it on the locket —"

"— and he must have realized they wouldn't let you have it if he put it in his will —"

"— so he made a copy —"

"— and put a fake in the glass case —"

"— and he left the real one — where?"

They gazed at each other; Harry felt that the answer was dangling invisibly in the air above them, tantalizingly close. Why hadn't Dumbledore told him? Or had he, in fact, told Harry, but Harry had not realized it at the time?

"Think!" whispered Hermione. "Think! Where would he have left it?"

"Not at Hogwarts," said Harry, resuming his pacing.

"Somewhere in Hogsmeade?" suggested Hermione.

"The Shrieking Shack?" said Harry. "Nobody ever goes in there."

"But Snape knows how to get in, wouldn't that be a bit risky?"

"Dumbledore trusted Snape," Harry reminded her.

“Not enough to tell him that he had swapped the swords,” said Hermione.

“Yeah, you’re right!” said Harry, and he felt even more cheered at the thought that Dumbledore had had some reservations, however faint, about Snape’s trustworthiness. “So, would he have hidden the sword well away from Hogsmeade, then? What d’you reckon, Ron? Ron?”

Harry looked around. For one bewildered moment he thought that Ron had left the tent, then realized that Ron was lying in the shadow of a lower bunk, looking stony.

“Oh, remembered me, have you?” he said.

“What?”

Ron snorted as he stared up at the underside of the upper bunk.

“You two carry on. Don’t let me spoil your fun.”

Perplexed, Harry looked to Hermione for help, but she shook her head, apparently as nonplussed as he was.

“What’s the problem?” asked Harry.

“Problem? There’s no problem,” said Ron, still refusing to look at Harry. “Not according to you, anyway.”

There were several *plunks* on the canvas over their heads. It had started to rain.

“Well, you’ve obviously got a problem,” said Harry. “Spit it out, will you?”

Ron swung his long legs off the bed and sat up. He looked mean, unlike himself.

“All right, I’ll spit it out. Don’t expect me to skip up and down the tent because there’s some other damn thing we’ve got to find. Just

add it to the list of stuff you don't know."

"I don't know?" repeated Harry. "*I* don't know?"

Plunk, plunk, plunk. The rain was falling harder and heavier; it pattered on the leaf-strewn bank all around them and into the river chattering through the dark. Dread doused Harry's jubilation: Ron was saying exactly what he had suspected and feared him to be thinking.

"It's not like I'm not having the time of my life here," said Ron, "you know, with my arm mangled and nothing to eat and freezing my backside off every night. I just hoped, you know, after we'd been running round a few weeks, we'd have achieved something."

"Ron," Hermione said, but in such a quiet voice that Ron could pretend not to have heard it over the loud tattoo the rain was now beating on the tent.

"I thought you knew what you'd signed up for," said Harry.

"Yeah, I thought I did too."

"So what part of it isn't living up to your expectations?" asked Harry. Anger was coming to his defense now. "Did you think we'd be staying in five-star hotels? Finding a Horcrux every other day? Did you think you'd be back to Mummy by Christmas?"

"We thought you knew what you were doing!" shouted Ron, standing up, and his words pierced Harry like scalding knives. "We thought Dumbledore had told you what to do, we thought you had a real plan!"

"Ron!" said Hermione, this time clearly audible over the rain thundering on the tent roof, but again, he ignored her.

"Well, sorry to let you down," said Harry, his voice quite calm

even though he felt hollow, inadequate. "I've been straight with you from the start, I told you everything Dumbledore told me. And in case you haven't noticed, we've found one Horcrux —"

"Yeah, and we're about as near getting rid of it as we are to finding the rest of them — nowhere effing near, in other words!"

"Take off the locket, Ron," Hermione said, her voice unusually high. "Please take it off. You wouldn't be talking like this if you hadn't been wearing it all day."

"Yeah, he would," said Harry, who did not want excuses made for Ron. "D'you think I haven't noticed the two of you whispering behind my back? D'you think I didn't guess you were thinking this stuff?"

"Harry, we weren't —"

"Don't lie!" Ron hurled at her. "You said it too, you said you were disappointed, you said you'd thought he had a bit more to go on than —"

"I didn't say it like that — Harry, I didn't!" she cried.

The rain was pounding the tent, tears were pouring down Hermione's face, and the excitement of a few minutes before had vanished as if it had never been, a short-lived firework that had flared and died, leaving everything dark, wet, and cold. The sword of Gryffindor was hidden they knew not where, and they were three teenagers in a tent whose only achievement was not, yet, to be dead.

"So why are you still here?" Harry asked Ron.

"Search me," said Ron.

"Go home then," said Harry.

"Yeah, maybe I will!" shouted Ron, and he took several steps toward Harry, who did not back away. "Didn't you hear what they

said about my sister? But you don't give a rat's fart, do you, it's only the Forbidden Forest, Harry *I've-Faced-Worse* Potter doesn't care what happens to her in here — well, I do, all right, giant spiders and mental stuff —"

"I was only saying — she was with the others, they were with Hagrid —"

"Yeah, I get it, you don't care! And what about the rest of my family, 'the Weasleys don't need another kid injured,' did you hear that?"

"Yeah, I —"

"Not bothered what it meant, though?"

"Ron!" said Hermione, forcing her way between them. "I don't think it means anything new has happened, anything we don't know about; think, Ron, Bill's already scarred, plenty of people must have seen that George has lost an ear by now, and you're supposed to be on your deathbed with spattergroit, I'm sure that's all he meant —"

"Oh, you're sure, are you? Right then, well, I won't bother myself about them. It's all right for you two, isn't it, with your parents safely out of the way —"

"My parents are *dead*!" Harry bellowed.

"And mine could be going the same way!" yelled Ron.

"Then GO!" roared Harry. "Go back to them, pretend you've got over your spattergroit and Mummy'll be able to feed you up and —"

Ron made a sudden movement: Harry reacted, but before either wand was clear of its owner's pocket, Hermione had raised her own.

"Protego!" she cried, and an invisible shield expanded between her and Harry on the one side and Ron on the other; all of them were

forced backward a few steps by the strength of the spell, and Harry and Ron glared from either side of the transparent barrier as though they were seeing each other clearly for the first time. Harry felt a corrosive hatred toward Ron: Something had broken between them.

"Leave the Horcrux," Harry said.

Ron wrenched the chain from over his head and cast the locket into a nearby chair. He turned to Hermione.

"What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you staying, or what?"

"I . . ." She looked anguished. "Yes — yes, I'm staying. Ron, we said we'd go with Harry, we said we'd help —"

"I get it. You choose him."

"Ron, no — please — come back, come back!"

She was impeded by her own Shield Charm; by the time she had removed it he had already stormed into the night. Harry stood quite still and silent, listening to her sobbing and calling Ron's name amongst the trees.

After a few minutes she returned, her sopping hair plastered to her face.

"He's g-g-gone! Disapparated!"

She threw herself into a chair, curled up, and started to cry.

Harry felt dazed. He stooped, picked up the Horcrux, and placed it around his own neck. He dragged blankets off Ron's bunk and threw them over Hermione. Then he climbed onto his own bed and stared up at the dark canvas roof, listening to the pounding of the rain.

— HOOFSTUK VYFTIEN —

Die Kabouter se Wraak

Vroeg die volgende oggend, voor die ander twee wakker is, kruip Harry by die tent uit en soek in die woud rondom hulle na die oudste, knoetserigste en taaiste boom wat hy kan kry. Daar in sy skaduwee begrawe hy Maloog Moody se oog en merk die plek deur met sy towerstaf 'n klein kruisie in die boombas uit te kerf. Dit is nie veel nie, maar Harry voel Maloog sou dit veel eerder verkies het as om teen Dolores Umbridge se deur vasgesit te wees. Dan gaan hy terug na die tent toe om te wag dat die ander wakker word en te bespreek wat hulle volgende gaan doen.

Harry en Hermione voel dit is beter om nie te lank op 'n plek te bly nie en Ron stem saam, met die een voorbehoud dat die volgende trekslag hulle binne bereik van 'n spektoebroodjie moet bring. Hermione verwyder dus die paljasse wat sy om die oopte opgestel het terwyl Harry en Ron ontslae raak van alle tekens dat hulle hier gekampeer het. Dan Disappareer hulle na die buitewyke van 'n klein markdorpie.

Toe hulle die tent in die skuilte van 'n klein kreupelbos opgeslaan het en dit met vars opgetowerde beskermende paljasse omring het, waag Harry dit onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel uit om kos te gaan soek. Dinge verloop egter nie soos beplan nie. Hy is skaars in die dorp of 'n onnatuurlike koue, 'n mis wat neerdaal en lug wat skielik donker word, laat hom in sy spore vries.

"Maar jy kan 'n briljante Patronus oproep!" protesteer Ron toe Harry met leë hande terug by die tent kom en net een woord prewel: "Dementors."

"Ek kon dit nie . . . regkry nie," hyg hy en hou die steek in sy sy vas. "Dit wou nie . . . kom nie."

Hulle uitdrukkings van ontsteltenis en teleurstelling laat Harry skaam voel. Dit was 'n nagmerrie-ondervinding om die Dementors uit die mis in die verte te sien nader gly en terwyl die verlammende koue sy asem wegslaan en 'n veraf gil in sy ore weergalm, te besef hy gaan homself nie kan beskerm nie. Dit het al Harry se wilskrag

gekos om hom weg te skeur van waar hy staan en weg te hardloop van die ooglose Dementors wat rondsweef tussen die Moggels wat hulle miskien nie kan sien nie, maar beslis die wanhoop wat hulle saai waar hulle ook al gaan, sal aanvoel.

"So ons het nog steeds geen kos nie."

"Bly stil, Ron," snou Hermione hom toe. "Harry, wat het gebeur? Hoekom dink jy kon jy nie jou Patronus optower nie? Jy't dit gister perfek reggekry!"

"Ek weet nie."

Hy sit laag in een van Perkins se ou leunstoele en voel elke sekonde meer verneder. Hy is bang daar het iets binne-in hom verkeerd gegaan. Gister voel baie lank gelede: hy kon vandag maklik weer dertien jaar oud gewees het, die enigste een wat op die Hogwarts Express ineengestort het.

Ron skop 'n stoel se poot.

"Wat?" grom hy vir Hermione. "Ek sterf van die honger! Al wat ek gehad het vandat ek my halfdood gebloei het, is 'n paar paddastoele!"

"Nou gaan veg jy dan jou pad oop deur die Dementors," sê Harry seergemaak.

"Ek sal, maar my arm is in 'n verband, ingeval jy dit nie agtergekom het nie!"

"Dis gerieflik."

"En wat is dit veronderstel om te –?"

"Natuurlik!" roep Hermione uit en slaan teen haar voorkop met een hand. Die ander twee bly verras stil. "Harry, gee vir my die hangertjie! Komaan," sê sy ongeduldig en klap haar vingers vir hom toe hy nie reageer nie, "die Horcrux, Harry, jy dra dit nog steeds!"

Sy hou haar hand uit en Harry lig die goue ketting oor sy kop. Die oomblik dat dit nie meer in kontak met sy vel is nie, voel hy vry en op 'n vreemde manier lig. Hy het nie eens besef hy voel natgesweet nie of dat daar 'n swaar gewig op sy maag druk totdat albei sensasies verdwyn het nie.

"Beter?" vra Hermione.

"Ja, baie beter!"

"Harry," sê sy en kom hurk by hom en praat in die soort stem wat hy assosieer met wanneer jy iemand wat baie siek is, besoek, "jy dink nie jy was dalk in sy mag nie?"

"Wat? Nee!" verdedig hy. "Ek onthou alles wat ons gedoen het terwyl ek dit gedra het. As ek in sy mag was, sou ek nie geweet het wat ek gedoen het nie, sou ek? Ginny het my vertel daar was tye dat sy niks kon onthou nie."

"Hm," sê Hermione en kyk af na die swaar hangertjie. "Wel, miskien moet ons dit nie dra nie. Ons kan dit net in die tent hou."

"Ons gaan nie die Horcrux laat rondlê nie," sê Harry beslis. "As ons dit verloor, as dit gesteel word –"

"Ag, oukei, oukei," sê Hermione. Sy sit dit om haar nek en steek dit voor by haar bloese in waar niemand dit kan sien nie. "Maar ons sal beurte maak om dit te dra, dan hou niemand dit vir te lank aan nie."

"Mooi," sê Ron geïrriteerd, "en noudat ons dit uitgesorteer het, kan ons asseblief gaan kos haal?"

"Reg, maar ons sal iewers anders moet gaan om dit te kry," sê Hermione en loer skrams na Harry. "Dit help nie ons bly op 'n plek waar ons weet daar Dementors rondhang nie."

Op die ou end kom hulle vir die nag tot rus in 'n afgeleë landery wat deel is van 'n eensame plaas waar hulle eiers en brood kan kry.

"Dis nie steel nie, is dit?" vra Hermione bekommerd terwyl hulle roereier op roosterbrood verslind. "Nie as ek geld by die hoenderhok gelos het nie?"

Ron rol sy oë en sê met bolwange: "Her'ione, jy 'orrie te 'eel. Onts'an!"

En dit is inderdaad baie makliker om te ontspan toe hulle lekker vol is. Die argument oor die Dementors is die aand vergete: hulle lag en gesels, en Harry voel opgeruimd, selfs vol hoop, toe hy die eerste van die nag se drie wagskofte neem.

Dit is die eerste keer dat hulle agterkom 'n vol maag lei tot 'n opgewekte stemming en 'n leë een tot twis en wanhoop. Harry is die minste verbaas hieroor, want hy het al tye van amperse hongersnood by die Dursleys beleef. Hermione het taamlik goed uitgehou die nagte dat hulle niks anders as bessies of ou beskuitjies geaas kry nie, al is haar humeur dalk effens korter as gewoonlik en haar stiltes redelik stug. Ron is egter gewoond aan drie heerlike maaltye per dag, danksy sy ma of Hogwarts se huiselwe, en die honger maak hom sowel onredelik as liggeraak. Wanneer die gebrek aan kos saamval met Ron se beurt om die Horcrux te dra, word hy bepaald onplesierig.

"So waarheen gaan ons volgende?" is sy konstante refrein. Hy het blykbaar nie self enige idees nie, maar verwag Harry en Hermione moet met planne vorendag kom terwyl hy sit en tob oor die skamele kosvoorraad. Gevolglik bring Harry en Hermione vrugtelose ure deur om te probeer besluit waar hulle die ander Horcruxe moontlik kan kry, en hoe om die een wat hulle reeds het, te vernietig.

Hulle gesprekke word al hoe meer herhalend omdat hulle geen nuwe inligting het nie.

Aangesien Dumbledore vir Harry gesê het hy glo Voldemort het die Horcruxe weggesteek op plekke wat vir hom belangrik is, herhaal hulle die name van die plekke waar hulle weet Voldemort gewoon het, of wat hy besoek het, oor en oor soos 'n vervelige gesanik. Die weeshuis waar hy gebore en grootgemaak is; Hogwarts, waar hy skoolgegaan het; Borgin en Burkes, waar hy ná skool gewerk het; en dan Albanië, waar hy die jare van sy ballingskap deurgebring het: hierdie moontlikhede vorm die basis van hulle bespiegelinge.

"Ja, kom ons gaan Albanië toe. Dit behoort nie meer as 'n middag te vat om 'n hele land te deursoek nie," sê Ron sarkasties.

"Daar kan nie iets daar wees nie. Hy't al klaar vyf van sy Horcruxe gemaak voor hy in ballingskap gegaan het, en Dumbledore was seker die slang is die sesde een," sê Hermione. "Ons weet die slang is nie in Albanië nie; hy's gewoonlik by Vol–"

"Ek het jou gevra om op te hou om hom so te noem!"

"Oukei! Die slang is gewoonlik by *Jy-Weet-Wie* – tevrede?"

"Nie rêrig nie."

"Ek kan nie dink dat hy enigiets by Borgin en Burkes sou weggesteek het nie," sê Harry, wat hierdie punt al voorheen geopper het. "Borgin en Burke was kenners van Donker voorwerpe; hulle sou 'n Horcrux dadelik herken het."

Ron gaap sarkasties. Harry onderdruk 'n sterk begeerte om hom met iets te gooi en ploeg voort: "Ek dink nog steeds hy het dalk iets by Hogwarts weggesteek."

Hermione sug.

"Maar Dumbledore sou dit gekry het, Harry!"

Harry herhaal die argument wat hy aanhoudend ten gunste van hierdie teorie aanvoer.

"Dumbledore het voor my gesê hy sal nooit voorgee hy ken al Hogwarts se geheime nie. Ek sê julle, as daar een plek is waar Vol–"

"Oi!"

"JY-WEET-WIE dan!" skree Harry wat nou te ver gedryf is. "As daar een plek is wat regtig vir Jy-Weet-Wie belangrik is, is dit Hogwarts!"

"Ag, komaan!" sê Ron spottend. "Sy *skool*?"

"Ja, sy skool! Dit was sy eerste regte tuiste, die plek wat beteken het hy is spesiaal. Dit het vir hom alles beteken, en selfs ná hy daar weg is –"

"Ons praat hier van Jy-Weet-Wie, reg? Nie van jou nie?" vra Ron. Hy trek aan die Horcrux om sy nek se ketting; Harry is sommer lus om dit te gryp en hom daarmee te verwurg.

"Jy't vir ons gesê Jy-Weet-Wie het Dumbledore gevra om vir hom werk te gee ná hy weg is," sê Hermione.

"Dis reg," sê Harry.

"En Dumbledore het gedink hy wou net terugkom om iets te probeer kry, moontlik nog 'n stigtersvoorwerp, om nog 'n Horcrux mee te maak?"

"Ja," sê Harry.

"Maar Dumbledore het nie vir hom werk gegee nie, nè?" sê Hermione. "So hy het nooit kans gekry om 'n stigtersvoorwerp daar te kry en dit in die skool weg te steek nie!"

"Oukei dan," moet Harry toegee. "Vergeet van Hogwarts."

Sonder enige ander leidrade reis hulle Londen toe en gaan soek die weeshuis waarin Voldemort grootgemaak is terwyl hulle onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel versteek is. Hermione sluip by 'n biblioteek in en ontdek in hulle rekords dat die plek al baie jare gelede gesloop is. Hulle besoek die terrein en tref 'n wolkekrabber vol kantore daar aan.

"Ons kan in die fondamente probeer rondgrawe," stel Hermione halfhartig voor.

"Hy sou nie 'n Horcrux hier weggesteek het nie," sê Harry. Hy weet dit al die hele tyd: Voldemort was vasberade om uit die weeshuis te ontsnap; hy sou nooit 'n deel van sy siel daar weggesteek het nie. Dumbledore het vir Harry gewys Voldemort het grootsheid en mistiek in sy wegsteekplekke gesoek; hierdie neerdrukkende, grys deel van Londen is so ver as wat 'n mens jou kan indink verwyder van Hogwarts of die Ministerie of 'n gebou soos Gringotts, die towenaarsbank, met sy goue deure en marmervloere.

Selfs sonder enige nuwe idees hou hulle aan om deur die platteland te beweeg en slaan die tent veiligheidshalwe elke nag op 'n ander plek op. Elke oggend maak hulle seker hulle het alle tekens van hulle teenwoordigheid verwyder en vertrek dan om nog 'n eensame en afgeleë plek te soek: hulle reis per Apparering na nog woude toe, na kranse se skaduryke skeure, na pers moerasse, berghange oortrek met skerpioenkruid en eenkeer 'n beskutte en klipperige baaitjie. Elke twaalf uur of so gee hulle die Horcrux onder mekaar aan asof hulle die een of ander perverse, stadige-aksie-weergawe van die pakkie-aangee-speletjie speel en ys om daaraan te dink dat die musiek kan ophou, want dan is die beloning twaalf uur van verhoogde spanning en vrees.

Harry se litteken prik nog steeds. Hy kom agter dit gebeur veral wanneer hy die Horcrux dra. Soms kan hy nie help om op die pyn te reageer nie.

"Wat? Wat het jy gesien?" vra Ron telkens as hy Harry sien ineenkrimp.

" 'n Gesig," prewel Harry elke keer. "Dieselfde gesig. Die dief wat Gregorovitch besteel het."

En dan draai Ron weg sonder om sy teleurstelling te probeer wegsteek. Harry weet Ron hoop om nuus van sy familie te kry of van die res van die Orde van die Feniks, maar hy wat Harry is, is per slot van rekening nie 'n televisieantenna nie; hy kan net sien wat Voldemort op 'n bepaalde oomblik dink, hy kan nie na willekeur op enigiets inskakel nie. Voldemort broei blykbaar onophoudelik oor die onbekende jong man met die vrolike gesig; Harry is seker Voldemort weet net so min soos hy wat die dief se naam is en waar hy hom bevind. Soos wat Harry se litteken aanhou brand en die opgewekte blondekop seun tergend in sy geheue rondsweef, leer hy om enige teken van pyn of ongemak weg te steek, want die ander twee word net ongeduldig as hy van die dief praat. Hy kan hulle nie juis kwalik neem nie; hulle is desperaat vir 'n leidraad oor die Horcruxe.

Soos die dae weke word, begin Harry vermoed dat Ron en Hermione gesprekke sonder en oor hom het. Hulle hou verskeie kere skielik op met praat as Harry by die tent inkom, en hy kom twee keer toevallig op hulle af waar hulle 'n entjie weg met hulle koppe bymekaar staan en vinnig praat; albei kere word hulle stil wanneer hulle besef hy beweeg nader en probeer maak asof hulle besig is om hout of water te soek.

Harry kan nie help om te wonder of hulle nie net ingestem het om saam te kom op wat nou soos 'n nuttelose en deurmekaar swerftog voel omdat hulle gedink het hy het die een of ander geheime plan waarvan hulle met verloop van tyd sal uitvind nie. Ron probeer nie eens om sy slegte bui weg te steek nie, en Harry begin vrees dat Hermione ook teleurgesteld is in sy swak leierskap. Hy probeer desperaat dink aan nog plekke waar daar Horcruxe kan wees, maar die enigste een wat aanhoudend by hom opkom, is Hogwarts, en aangesien nie een van die ander dink dit is enigsins moontlik nie, hou hy op om dit voor te stel.

Herfs rol oor die landskap terwyl hulle daardeur beweeg: hulle slaan die tent nou op op grond bestrooi met afgevalde blare. Natuurlike misnewels vermeng met die Dementors se slierte; wind en reën vererger hulle probleme. Die feit dat Hermione beter word om eetbare paddastoele te identifiseer, vergoed nie heeltemal vir hulle voortdurende isolasie, die gebrek aan ander mense se geselskap of hulle algehele onkunde oor wat in die oorlog teen Voldemort aangaan nie.

"My ma," sê Ron een aand terwyl hulle in die tent op die oewer van 'n rivier in Wallis sit, "kan lekker kos uit die niet uit optower."

Hy krap die stukke verbrande grys vis op sy bord humeurig deurmekaar. Harry kyk outomaties na Ron se nek en sien, soos hy verwag het, die Horcrux se goue ketting daar glinster. Hy kry dit reg om die impuls om Ron te vloek, te onderdruk, want hy weet sy houding sal effens verbeter wanneer dit tyd word om die hangertjie af te haal.

"Jou ma kan nie kos uit die niet optower nie," sê Hermione. "Niemand kan nie. Kos is die eerste van die vyf Hoofuitsonderings op Gamp se Wet van Elementêre Transfig–"

"Praat dat mens jou kan verstaan," sê Ron terwyl hy 'n graat tussen sy tande uitwikkel.

"Dis onmoontlik om lekker kos uit niks te maak! Jy kan dit Ontbied as jy weet waar dit is, jy kan dit transformeer, jy kan dit meer maak as jy al klaar 'n bietjie het –"

"– wel, moenie bodder om hierdie meer te maak nie; dis walglik," sê Ron.

"Harry het die vis gevang en ek het my bes daarmee gedoen! Ek kom agter ek is altyd die een wat op die ou end met die kos moet sukkel; seker omdat ek 'n *meisie* is, nè?"

"Nee, dis omdat jy kastig die beste met toor is!" kap Ron terug.

Hermione spring op en stukkies gebraaide varswatersnoek gly van haar blikbord af en val op die vloer.

"*Jy* kan môre kos maak, Ron, *jy* kan die regte bestanddele kry en probeer om iets op te tower wat die moeite werd is om te eet, en ek sal hier sit en gesigte trek en kerm en kla en dan kan jy sien hoe jy –"

"Bly stil!" sê Harry wat ook opspring en sy hande in die lug hou. "Bly *dadelik* stil!"

Hermione is ontstoke.

"Hoe kan jy sy kant kies? Hy maak omtrent nooit kos –"

"Bly stil, Hermione, ek hoor iemand!"

Hy luister met gespitste ore, sy hande nog steeds gelig om hulle te waarsku om nie te praat nie. En dan, oor die geruis en gesuis van die donker rivier langs hulle, hoor hy weer die stemme. Hy kyk om na die Loerskoop. Dit beweeg nie.

"Jy het mos die *Muffliato*-towerspreuk oor ons uitgespreek, nè?" fluister hy vir Hermione.

"Ek het alles gedoen," fluister sy terug, "*Muffliato*, Moggelwering- en Ontgogelingspreuke, de lot. Wie dit ook al is, behoort ons nie te kan hoor of sien nie."

Swaar skuifel- en skuurgeluide, plus die geluid van klippe wat wegrol en takke wat breek, sê vir hulle verskeie mense klouter af by die steil, beboste wal wat afloop na die smal oewer waar hulle die tent opgeslaan het. Hulle haal hulle towerstawwe uit en wag. Die towerspreuke rondom hulle behoort voldoende te wees om in hierdie amper volslae duisternis te keer dat Moggels en normale hekse en towenaars hulle opmerk. As dit egter Doodseters is, gaan hulle verdedigingswerk miskien vir die eerste keer deur Donker Towerkrag op die proef gestel word.

Die stemme word harder, maar nie meer verstaanbaar nie wanneer die groep mans die oewer bereik. Harry skat hulle is minder as ses meter weg, maar die bruisende rivier maak dit moeilik om seker te wees. Hermione gryp haar kraletjiehandsak en begin daarin rondkrap; ná 'n oomblik haal sy drie Verlengbare Ore uit en gooi een elk vir Harry en Ron wat die een kant van die vleeskleurige pypies haastig in hulle ore druk en die ander kant by die tent se ingang uit buitentoe stoot.

Binne sekondes hoor Harry 'n moeë manstem.

"Daar behoort salm hier te wees, of dink julle dis te vroeg in die seisoen? *Accio salm!*"

Daar is 'n paar duidelike spatgeluide en dan die geklap van vis teen vlees. Iemand grom waarderend en Harry druk die Verlengbare Oor dieper in syne: oor die rivier se gemurmel kan hy nóg stemme uitmaak, maar hulle praat nie 'n taal wat hy al ooit gehoor het nie. Dit is 'n growwe, onwelluidende taal, 'n rits ratelende, gutturale klanke, en dit klink of daar net twee sprekers is, een met 'n effens laer, stadiger stem as die ander.

'n Vuur begin brand aan die oorkant van die tent; groot skadu's vorm tussen die tent en die vlamme. Die smaaklike geur van gebakte salm dryf tergend in hul rigting. Dan hoor hulle die gekletter van messegoed op borde, en die eerste man praat weer.

"Hier, Griphook, Gornuk."

Kabouters! vorm Hermione die woord vir Harry wat knik.

"Dankie," sê die kabouters saam in mensetaal.

"So hoe lank is julle drie al op vlug?" vra 'n nuwe rustige en aangename stem. Dit klink vir Harry vaagweg bekend en hy verbeel hom 'n prentjie van 'n man met 'n boepens en opgewekte gesig.

"Ses weke . . . sewe . . . Ek't al vergeet," sê die moeë man. "Het binne die eerste paar dae vir Griphook raakgeloop en nie lank daarna nie kragte met Gornuk saamgesnoer. Goed om bietjie geselskap te hê." Daar is 'n pouse terwyl messegoed borde skoonkrap en blik-

bekers opgetel en weer terug op die grond gesit word. "Wat het jou laat padgee, Ted?" vervolg die man.

"Het geweet hulle kom my haal," antwoord Ted met die rustige stem en Harry weet skielik wie hy is: Tonks se pa. "Het gehoor die Doodseters was laas week in die omgewing en toe besluit ek ek moet liewers die pad vat. Het uit beginsel geweier om as 'n Moggelgeborene te registreer, sien; so ek het geweet dis net 'n kwessie van tyd, geweet ek sal op die ou end moet verkas. My vrou behoort veilig te wees; sy's suiwerbloed. En toe ontmoet ek Dean hier, wat, 'n paar dae gelede, nè, seun?"

"Ja," sê 'n ander stem, en Harry, Ron en Hermione staar na mekaar, stil maar rasend opgewonde. Hulle is seker hulle herken die stem van Dean Thomas, hulle mede-Gryffindor.

"Moggelgeborene, nè?" vra die eerste man.

"Nie seker nie," sê Dean. "My pa het my ma gelos toe ek klein was. Ek het g'n bewys dat hy 'n towenaar is nie."

Dit is 'n rukkie stil, afgesien van die kougeluide, dan praat Ted weer.

"Ek moet sê, Dirk, ek's verbaas om jou raak te loop. Bly, maar verbaas. Daar was gerugte dat jy gevang is."

"Ek was," sê Dirk. "Ek was halfpad Azkaban toe, toe Bedwelm ek Dawlish, steel sy besem en ontsnap. Dit was makliker as wat mens sal dink; ek reken hy's nie op die oomblik te lekker nie. Daar's dalk 'n Warvloek op hom. As dit so is, sal ek graag hand wil skud met die heks of towenaar wat dit gedoen het; dit het heel moontlik my lewe gered."

Daar is nog 'n pouse waarin die vuur knetter en die rivier aanhou ruis. Dan sê Ted: "En waar pas julle twee in? Ek, e, was onder die indruk die kabouters is pro-Jy-Weet-Wie, oor die algemeen."

"Dit was die verkeerde indruk," sê die kabouter met die hoë stem. "Ons kies nie kant nie. Dit is 'n oorlog tussen towenaars hierdie."

"Nou hoekom kruip julle dan weg?"

"Ek het gedink dis raadsaam," sê die kabouter met die dieper stem. "Nadat ek 'n versoek wat ek as voorbarig beskou, geweier het, kon ek sien my persoonlike veiligheid is op die spel."

"Wat wou hulle hê jy moet doen?" vra Ted.

"Dinge wat benede my ras se waardigheid is," antwoord die kabouter en sy stem is nou growwer en minder menslik. "Ek is nie 'n huiself nie."

"Wat van jou, Griphook?"

"Soortgelyke redes," sê die kabouter met die hoë stem. "Gringotts is nie meer onder my ras se alleenbeheer nie. Ek het geen resep vir 'n towenaarbaas nie."

Hy voeg fluisterend iets in Kaboutertaal by en Gornuk lag.
"Wat's die grap?" vra Dean.
"Hy't gesê," antwoord Dirk, "daar is ander goed wat towenaars ook nie erken nie."
Daar is 'n kort pouse.
"Ek vang dit nie," sê Dean.
"Ek het op my manier wraak geneem voor ek weg is," sê Griphook in mensetaal.
"Dis nou 'n man duisend – e, ek bedoel kabouter," help Ted homself haastig reg. "Jy't nie dalk 'n Doodseter in een van die ou hoësekuriteitskluise toegesluit nie?"
"As ek het, sou die swaard hom nie gehelp het om te ontsnap nie," antwoord Griphook. Gornuk lag weer en selfs Dirk gee 'n droë laggie.
"Ek en Dean is nog steeds in die duister," sê Ted.
"Severus Snape ook, al weet hy dit nie," sê Griphook en die twee kabouters lag brullend en snedig.
In die tent haal Harry vlak asem van opwinding; hy en Hermione staar na mekaar en luister so fyn as wat hulle kan.
"Het jy nie daarvan gehoor nie, Ted?" vra Dirk. "Die kinders het Gryffindor se swaard uit Snape se kantoor by Hogwarts probeer steel."
Dit voel of daar 'n elektriese stroom deur Harry vloei; elke senuwee in sy lyf skree terwyl hy vasgenael staan.
"Nooit 'n woord daarvan gehoor nie," sê Ted. "Was nie in die *Profeet* nie, was dit?"
"Allesbehalwe," grinnik Dirk. "Griphook het my vertel; hy het daarvan gehoor by Bill Weasley wat by die bank werk. Een van die kinders wat die swaard probeer vat het, is Bill se jonger suster."
Harry loer na Hermione en Ron wat albei aan die Verlengbare Ore vasklou asof dit reddingstoue is.
"Sy en twee maats het by Snape se kantoor ingesluip en die glaskas waarin hy die swaard blykbaar hou, oopgebreek. Snape het hulle gevang toe hulle dit by die trap af probeer wegsmokkel het."
"Liewe hemel," sê Ted. "Wat het hulle gedink? Dat hulle die swaard op Jy-Weet-Wie kan gebruik? Of op Snape self?"
"Wel, wat hulle ook al gedink het hulle gaan daarmee doen, Snape het besluit die swaard is nie meer veilig waar dit was nie," sê Dirk. " 'n Paar dae later, seker net nadat hy toestemming by Jy-Weet-Wie gekry het, het hy dit Londen toe gestuur sodat dit in Gringotts bewaar kan word."
Die kabouters begin weer lag.

"Ek verstaan nog steeds nie die grap nie," sê Ted.
"Dis 'n namaaksel," krys Griphook.
"Gryffindor se swaard!"
"O ja. Dis 'n kopie – gewis 'n uitstekende kopie – maar dit is deur 'n towenaar gemaak. Die oorspronklike een is eeue gelede deur kabouters gesmee en het sekere kenmerke waaroor slegs kabouter-vervaardigde wapenrusting beskik. Waar ook al Gryffindor se ware swaard is, dit is nie in 'n kluis in Gringotts Bank nie."
"Ek sien," sê Ted. "En ek neem aan jy't nie die moeite gedoen om die Doodseters daarvan te vertel nie?"
"Ek het geen rede gesien om hulle met daardie inligting te belas nie," sê Griphook selfvoldaan, en nou lag Ted en Dean saam met Gornuk en Dirk.
In die tent maak Harry sy oë toe en probeer iemand dwing om die vraag te vra wat hy beantwoord wil hê, en ná 'n minuut wat soos tien voel, doen Dean dit goedgunstiglik; hy is ook (onthou Harry met 'n skok) 'n eks-kêrel van Ginny.
"Wat het met Ginny en die ander gebeur? Die studente wat dit probeer steel het?"
"O, hulle is gestraf, en wreed ook," sê Griphook ongeërg.
"Maar is hulle oukei?" vra Ted vinnig. "Ek bedoel, die Weasleys het nie nodig dat nog een van hulle kinders beseer word nie, of hoe?"
"Sover ek weet, het hulle nie ernstige beserings opgedoen nie," sê Griphook.
"Hulle's gelukkig," sê Ted. "Met wat Snape al alles in die verlede gedoen het, behoort ons bly te wees hulle lewe nog."
"Glo jy dan daardie storie?" vra Dirk. "Glo jy Snape het Dumbledore doodgemaak?"
"Natuurlik glo ek dit," sê Ted. "Jy gaan tog nie daar sit en vir my vertel jy dink Potter het enigiets daarmee te doen gehad nie?"
"Dis deesdae moeilik om te weet wat om te glo," mompel Dirk.
"Ek ken Harry Potter," sê Dean. "En ek dink hy's die ware een – die Uitverkorene, of wat ook al jy dit wil noem."
"Ja, daar's baie mense wat graag wil glo dis wat hy is, seun," sê Dirk, "insluitende ek. Maar waar is hy? Weggehardloop, lyk dit vir my. Mens sou dink as hy enige iets weet wat ons nie weet nie, of iets spesiaals het wat in sy guns tel, sal hy nou daarbuite wees, besig om te baklei, besig om ondersteuners vir die weerstand te werf, pleks van wegkruip. En julle weet, die *Profeet* het 'n deksels goeie saak teen hom uitgemaak –"
"Die *Profeet*?" snork Ted. "Jy verdien om belieg te word as jy nog steeds daai gemors lees, Dirk. As jy die feite soek, probeer *Die Vitter*."

Daar is skielik 'n ontploffing van wurg- en braakgeluide, plus 'n paar harde kloppe; dit klink of Dirk 'n graat ingesluk het. Uiteindelik sê hy proesend: "*Die Vitter*? Xeno Lovegood se kranksinnige smeerblaadjie?"

"Dis nie deesdae meer so kranksinnig nie," sê Ted. "Jy moet weer daarna kyk. Xeno publiseer al die goed wat die *Profeet* ignoreer; daar was nie een woord oor Frommelhoring Snorklappe in die laaste uitgawe nie. Ek weet nie hoe lank hulle hom daarmee gaan laat wegkom nie, maar Xeno sê op die voorblad van elke uitgawe enige towenaar wat teen Jy-Weet-Wie is, moet dit sy prioriteit nommer een maak om Harry Potter te help."

"Moeilik om 'n seun te help wat van die aardbodem af verdwyn het," sê Dirk.

"Luister, die feit dat hulle hom nog nie gevang het nie, is 'n hengse prestasie," sê Ted. "Ek sal graag by hom wil kers opsteek. Dis tog wat ons probeer doen, om vry te bly, nie waar nie?"

"Ja, wel, jy't 'n punt daar beet," sê Dirk swaarmoedig. "Met die hele Ministerie en al hulle informante wat hom soek, het ek gedink hy sal teen dié tyd al gevang wees. Aan die ander kant, wie sê hulle het hom nie klaar gevang en doodgemaak sonder om dit bekend te maak nie?"

"Nee, moenie sulke goed sê nie, Dirk," prewel Ted.

Daar is 'n lang pouse gevul met die verdere gekletter van messe en vurke. Toe hulle weer praat, is dit om te bespreek of hulle op die oewer moet slaap of terug teen die beboste steilte moet opgaan. Hulle besluit die bome sal beter beskutting bied, maak hulle vuur dood en klouter dan terug teen die wal op terwyl hulle stemme wegdoof.

Harry, Ron en Hermione katrol die Verlengbare Ore in. Harry, vir wie dit al hoe moeiliker geword het om stil te bly hoe langer hulle afgeluister het, kan nou niks meer sê nie as net: "Ginny – die swaard –"

"Ek weet!" sê Hermione.

Sy steek haar hand na die kraletjiehandsak toe uit en druk haar arm dié keer tot reg by die kieliebak daarin.

"Hier . . . is . . . dit . . ." sê sy tussen knersende tande deur en trek aan iets wat duidelik heel onder in die handsak lê. Die rand van 'n swierige portretraam kom stadig te voorskyn. Harry snel haar te hulp. Terwyl hulle Phineas Nigellus se leë portret uit Hermione se handsak lig, hou sy haar towerstaf daarop gemik, gereed om enige oomblik 'n towerspreuk af te vuur.

"As iemand die regte swaard vir 'n vals een omgeruil het terwyl dit in Dumbledore se kantoor was," sê sy hygend terwyl hulle die

portret teen die kant van die tent neersit, "sou Phineas Nigellus dit sien gebeur het, want hy hang reg langsaan die glaskas!"

"Behalwe as hy geslaap het," sê Harry, maar hy hou nogtans asem op toe Hermione voor die leë skilderdoek kniel, haar towerstaf op die middel daarvan rig, keel skoonmaak en dan sê: "E – Phineas? Phineas Nigellus?"

Niks gebeur nie.

"Phineas Nigellus?" sê Hermione weer. "Professor Black? Kan ons asseblief met u praat? Asseblief?"

"'Asseblief' help altyd," sê 'n koue, snedige stem en Phineas Nigellus glip by sy portret in. Hermione roep dadelik uit: *"Obscuro!"*

'n Swart blinddoek verskyn oor Phineas Nigellus se slim donker oë met die gevolg dat hy hom teen die raam stamp en gil van pyn.

"Wat – hoe durf – wat doen jy –?"

"Ek is baie jammer, professor Black," sê Hermione, "maar dit is 'n noodsaaklike voorsorgmaatreël!"

"Verwyder hierdie vieslike lap oombliklik! Verwyder dit, sê ek! Jy ruïneer 'n groot kunswerk! Waar is ek? Wat gaan aan?"

"Maak nie saak waar ons is nie," sê Harry. Phineas Nigellus vries en laat vaar sy pogings om die geverfde blinddoek af te ruk.

"Kan dit moontlik die ontwykende meneer Potter se stem wees?"

"Miskien," sê Harry wat weet dit sal Phineas Nigellus se belangstelling prikkel. "Ons wil vir u 'n paar vrae vra – oor Gryffindor se swaard."

"A," sê Phineas Nigellus wat sy kop nou van die een kant na die ander draai in 'n poging om Harry in die oog te kry, "ja. Daardie verspotte meisie het baie onwys opgetree –"

"Sjarrap oor my suster," sê Ron vies. Phineas Nigellus lig sy hooghartige wenkbroue.

"Wie is ook nog hier?" vra hy en draai sy kop weer van kant tot kant. "Jou stemtoon staan my nie aan nie! Die meisie en haar vriende was uitermate roekeloos. Om 'n skoolhoof te besteel!"

"Dit was nie steel nie," sê Harry. "Dis nie Snape se swaard nie."

"Dit behoort aan professor Snape se skool," sê Phineas Nigellus. "Watter aanspraak het die Weasley-meisie kwansuis daarop? Sy het haar straf verdien, en dieselfde geld daardie sot van 'n Longbottom en daardie Lovegood-koddigheid!"

"Neville is nie 'n sot nie en Luna is nie 'n koddigheid nie!" sê Hermione.

"Waar is ek?" herhaal Phineas Nigellus en begin weer met die blinddoek worstel. "Waarheen het julle my geneem? Hoekom het julle my uit my voorsate se tuiste verwyder?"

"Vergeet daarvan! Hoe het Snape vir Ginny, Neville en Luna gestraf?" vra Harry dringend.

"*Professor* Snape het hulle die Verbode Woud ingestuur om vir daai lummel, Hagrid, te gaan werk."

"Hagrid is nie 'n lummel nie!" sê Hermione skril.

"En Snape het dalk gedink dis 'n straf," sê Harry, "maar Ginny, Neville en Luna het tien teen een lekker saam met Hagrid gelag. Die Verbode Woud . . . Hulle het al baie erger dinge as die Verbode Woud trotseer; dis niks nie!"

Hy voel verlig; hy het aan allerhande wreedhede gedink, die Cruciatusvloek op die allerminste.

"Wat ons eintlik wil weet, professor Black, is of enigiemand anders, e, die swaard weggevat het? Miskien is dit daar uitgeneem om skoongemaak te word of – of iets?"

Phineas Nigellus hou weer op sukkel om sy oë te probeer oopkry en grinnik.

"*Moggelgeborenes,*" sê hy. "Kaboutervervaardigde wapentuig hoef nie skoongemaak te word nie, jou simpel meisiekind. Kaboutersilwer verdryf alledaagse stof en neem net stowwe op wat dit versterk."

"Moenie Hermione simpel noem nie," sê Harry.

"Ek word moeg daarvoor om so weerspreek te word," sê Phineas Nigellus. "Miskien is dit tyd om na die skoolhoof se kantoor terug te keer?"

Nog steeds geblinddoek gryp hy die kant van sy raam vas en probeer voel-voel uit sy portret kom en teruggaan in die een by Hogwarts. Harry kry skielik 'n ingewing.

"Dumbledore! Kan u Dumbledore vir ons bring?"

"Ekskuus?" vra Phineas Nigellus.

"Professor Dumbledore se portret – kan u hom hierheen bring, na u s'n toe?"

Phineas Nigellus draai sy gesig in die rigting van Harry se stem.

"Klaarblyklik is dit nie net Moggelgeborenes wat oningelig is nie, Potter. Die portrette in Hogwarts kan met mekaar kommunikeer, maar hulle kan nie buite die kasteel reis nie, behalwe om 'n skildery van hulle wat iewers anders hang, te besoek. Dumbledore kan nie saam met my hierheen kom nie, en ná die behandeling wat ek van julle moes verduur, kan ek jou verseker ek sal nie weer kom kuier nie!"

Effens afgehaal, kyk Harry hoe Phineas sy pogings verdubbel om by sy raam uit te kom.

"Professor Black," sê Hermione, "kan u nie net *asseblief* vir ons sê wanneer die swaard die laaste keer uit sy glaskas gehaal is nie? Ek bedoel nou voor Ginny dit gevat het?"

Phineas snork ongeduldig.

"Ek meen die laaste keer wat ek gesien het hoe Gryffindor se swaard uit die glaskas gehaal word, was toe professor Dumbledore dit gebruik het om die ring mee oop te breek."

Hermione wip om en kyk na Harry. Nie een van hulle waag dit om meer te sê voor Phineas Nigellus nie, wat dit uiteindelik regkry om die uitgang op te spoor.

"Wel, goeienag dan," sê hy effens venynig en beweeg weer uit die oog. Net sy hoed se rand is nog sigbaar toe Harry skielik skree.

"Wag! Het u vir Snape vertel u het dit gesien?"

Phineas Nigellus steek sy geblinddoekte gesig weer by die portret in.

"Professor Snape het belangriker sake om hom oor te kwel as Albus Dumbledore se vele eksentrisiteite. *Tot siens*, Potter!"

En daarmee verdwyn hy heeltemal en laat niks behalwe sy donker doek agter nie.

"Harry!" roep Hermione uit.

"Ek weet!" skree Harry. Hy kan homself nie inhou nie en bal sy vuis in die lug; dit was meer as waarvoor hy durf hoop het. Hy loop op en af in die tent en voel asof hy ver kan gaan hardloop; hy is nie eens meer honger nie. Hermione prop Phineas Nigellus se portret terug in die kraletjiehandsak, dan knip sy dit toe, gooi dit eenkant en kyk met 'n stralende gesig op na Harry.

"Die swaard kan Horcruxe vernietig! Kaboutergemaakte lemme neem slegs dit wat hulle sterker maak op – Harry, daai swaard is met Basiliskgif deurdrenk!"

"En Dumbledore het dit nie vir my gegee nie omdat hy dit nog nodig gehad het; hy wou dit op die hangertjie gebruik –"

"– en hy moes besef het hulle sal dit nie vir jou gee as hy dit in sy testament sit nie –"

"– so toe maak hy 'n namaaksel –"

"– en sit 'n vals een in die glaskas –"

"– en los die regte een . . . waar?"

Hulle staar na mekaar; Harry voel die antwoord hang onsigbaar in die lug voor hulle, tergend naby. Hoekom het Dumbledore hom nie vertel nie? Of het hy Harry inderdaad vertel sonder dat Harry dit destyds besef het?

"Dink!" fluister Hermione. "Dink! Waar kon hy dit weggesteek het?"

"Nie by Hogwarts nie," sê Harry en begin weer heen en weer loop.

"Iewers in Hogsmeade?" stel Hermione voor.

"Die Kermende Krot?" sê Harry. "Niemand gaan ooit daar in nie."

“Maar Snape weet hoe om daar in te kom, so is dit nie ’n bietjie gewaagd nie?”
“Dumbledore het Snape vertrou,” herinner Harry haar.
“Nie genoeg om vir hom te vertel dat hy die swaarde omgeruil het nie,” sê Hermione.
“Ja, jy’s reg!” sê Harry en hy kry meer moed by die gedagte dat Dumbledore ’n mate van voorbehoud, al was dit ook hoe min, oor Snape se betroubaarheid gehad het. “So, sou hy die swaard dan ver van Hogsmeade af weggesteek het? Wat dink jy, Ron? Ron?”
Harry kyk om. Vir een verbysterende oomblik dink hy Ron is by die tent uit, dan besef hy Ron lê uitdrukkingloos in die skaduwee van ’n onderste slaapbank.
“O, julle’t sowaar van my onthou?” sê hy.
“Wat?”
Ron snork terwyl hy na die boonste slaapbank se onderkant toe opkyk.
“Gaan julle twee maar aan. Moenie dat ek julle pret bederf nie.”
Harry kyk verward na Hermione om hulp, maar sy skud haar kop, blykbaar net so dronkgeslaan soos hy.
“Wat’s die probleem?” vra Harry.
“Probleem? Daar’s g’n probleem nie,” sê Ron wat nog steeds weier om na Harry te kyk. “In elk geval nie volgens jou nie.”
Daar is een *plof* ná die ander op die seil bokant hulle koppe. Dit het begin reën.
“Wel, jy het duidelik ’n probleem,” sê Harry. “Komaan, spoeg dit uit.”
Ron swaai sy lang bene van die bed af en sit regop. Hy lyk gemeen, glad nie homself nie.
“Oukei, ek sal dit uitspoeg. Moenie van my verwag om op en af te spring omdat daar nou ’n ander dêm ding is wat ons moet kry nie. Sit dit net by die lys goed wat jy nie weet nie.”
“Wat ek nie weet nie?” herhaal Harry. “Wat *ek* nie weet nie?”
Plof, plof, plof: die reën val harder en swaarder; dit kletter op die blaarbesaaide oewer oral om hulle en in die rivier wat deur die duister babbel. Vrees blus Harry se uitbundigheid: Ron sê presies wat hy vermoed het en bang was Ron sou dink.
“Dis nie asof ek die tyd van my lewe hier het nie,” sê Ron, “weet, jy met my arm verskeur en niks om te eet nie en elke nag verkluim. Ek het net gehoop, weet jy, ná ons ’n paar weke so rondgehol het, dat ons al iets sou bereik het.”
“Ron,” sê Hermione, maar in so ’n stil stem dat Ron kan maak asof hy dit nie gehoor het bo die harde taptoe wat die reën nou op die tent trommel nie.

"Ek dog jy't geweet waarvoor jy jou inlaat," sê Harry.

"Jip, ek het ook so gedink."

"So watter deel hiervan beantwoord nie aan jou verwagtinge nie?" vra Harry. Woede kom nou tot sy verdediging. "Het jy gedink ons gaan in vyfsterhotelle bly? Elke tweede dag 'n Horcrux opspoor? Het jy gedink jy gaan Kersfees terug by Mamma wees?"

"Ons het gedink jy weet wat jy doen!" gil Ron en spring op. Sy woorde deurboor Harry soos skroeiende warm messe. "Ons het gedink Dumbledore het vir jou gesê wat om te doen; ons het gedink jy't 'n ordentlike plan!"

"Ron!" sê Hermione, hierdie keer duidelik hoorbaar bo die reën wat op die tent se dak dawer, maar hy ignoreer haar weer.

"Wel, jammer om jou teleur te stel," sê Harry. Sy stem is heeltemal kalm, selfs al voel hy hol, ontoereikend. "Ek het van die begin af oop kaarte met julle gespeel. Ek het vir julle alles vertel wat Dumbledore my vertel het. En ingeval jy dit nie agtergekom het nie, ons het een Horcrux gekry –"

"Ja, en ons is omtrent so ná daaraan om daarvan ontslae te raak as wat ons is om die res van hulle te kry – met ander woorde, nie flippen naastenby nie!"

"Haal die hangertjie af, Ron," sê Hermione en haar stem is ongewoon hoog. "Haal dit asseblief af. Jy sal nie so praat as jy dit nie al heeldag gedra het nie."

"Ja, hy sal," sê Harry wat nie verskonings vir Ron wil hoor nie. "Dink julle ek het nie agtergekom hoe julle twee agter my rug fluister nie? Dink julle ek het nie geraai dat julle sulke goed dink nie?"

"Harry, ons het nie –"

"Moenie lieg nie!" snou Ron haar toe. "Jy't dit ook gesê. Jy't gesê jy's teleurgesteld, jy't gesê jy't gedink hy't 'n bietjie meer gehad om op af te gaan as –"

"Ek het dit nie so bedoel nie – Harry, ek het nie!" roep sy uit.

Die reën hamer op die tent neer, trane loop by Hermione se gesig af en die opwinding van 'n paar minute gelede het verdwyn asof dit nooit daar was nie, 'n kortstondige vuurwerk wat opgeflikker het en nou dood is en alles donker, nat en koud agterlaat. Hulle weet nie waar Gryffindor se swaard weggesteek is nie, en hulle is drie tieners in 'n tent en hul enigste prestasie is dat hulle nie dood is nie, nog nie.

"So hoekom is jy nog steeds hier?" vra Harry vir Ron.

"Weetie," sê Ron.

"Nou gaan dan huis toe," sê Harry.

"Ja, miskien moet ek!" roep Ron uit en gee 'n paar tree tot by

Harry wat nie retireer nie. "Het jy nie gehoor wat hulle van my suster sê nie? Maar jy gee nie 'n moer om nie, nè? Dis net die Verbode Woud, Harry *Ek't-Al-Erger-Trotseer* Potter gee nie om wat daar met haar gebeur het nie, wel, ek gee om, oukei, daar's reusespinnekoppe en mal dierasies –"

"Ek het net gesê – sy was saam met die ander, Hagrid was by hulle –"

"– ja, ek kry die boodskap, jy gee nie om nie! En wat van die res van my mense? 'Die Weasleys het nie nodig dat nog een van hulle kinders moet seerkry nie,' het jy dit gehoor?"

"Ja, ek –"

"Maar jy worrie nie wat dit beteken het nie, nè?"

"Ron!" sê Hermione en druk tussen hulle in. "Ek dink nie dit beteken daar het iets nuuts, iets waarvan ons nie weet nie, gebeur nie. Dink, Ron: Bill is al klaar vol letsels, baie mense moes teen hierdie tyd al gesien het George het 'n oor verloor, en jy's veronderstel om op sterwe te lê met waterpokkies; ek is seker dis al wat hy bedoel het –"

"O, jy's seker? Orraait dan, ek sal nie oor hulle worrie nie. Dis maklik vir julle twee; met julle ouers veilig uit die pad –"

"My ouers is *dood*!" bulder Harry.

"En myne dalk een van die dae ook!" gil Ron.

"Nou WAAI dan!" brul Harry. "Gaan terug na hulle toe, maak of jy oor jou waterpokkies is en laat Mamma jou vet voer en –"

Ron maak 'n skielike beweging. Harry reageer, maar voor een van die twee se towerstaf uit sy sak is, lig Hermione hare.

"*Protego!*" roep sy uit en 'n onsigbare skild vou oop tussen haar en Harry aan die een en Ron aan die ander kant; die krag van die towerspreuk dwing hulle al drie om 'n paar tree terug te gee, en Harry en Ron gluur mekaar van weerskante van die deurskynende versperring af aan asof hulle mekaar vir die eerste keer duidelik sien. Harry voel 'n verterende haat vir Ron: iets het tussen hulle gebreek.

"Los die Horcrux hier," sê Harry.

Ron pluk die ketting oor sy kop en smyt die hangertjie neer op 'n stoel wat daar naby staan. Hy draai na Hermione.

"Wat gaan jy doen?"

"Wat bedoel jy?"

"Gaan jy bly, of nie?"

"Ek . . ." Sy lyk benoud. "Ja – ja, ek gaan bly. Ron, ons het gesê ons gaan saam met Harry; ons het gesê ons gaan hom help –"

"Ek kry die boodskap. Jy kies hom."

"Ron, nee – asseblief – kom terug, kom terug!"

Haar eie Skildspreuk hou haar terug. Teen die tyd dat sy dit verwyder het, het hy alreeds die nag ingestorm. Harry staan roerloos en sê nie 'n woord nie; hy luister hoe sy snik en Ron se naam tussen die bome uitroep.

Ná 'n paar minute kom sy terug, haar papnat hare aan haar gesig vasgeplak.

"Hy's w – w – weg! Ge-Disappareer!"

Sy gooi haarself op 'n stoel neer, krul op en begin huil.

Harry voel verbysterd. Hy buk, tel die Horcrux op en sit dit om sy nek. Hy trek die komberse van Ron se slaapbank af en gooi dit oor Hermione. Dan klim hy in sy eie slaapbank en staar op na die donker seildak terwyl hy na die reën se gedruis luister.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



GODRIC'S HOLLOW

When Harry woke the following day it was several seconds before he remembered what had happened. Then he hoped, childishly, that it had been a dream, that Ron was still there and had never left. Yet by turning his head on his pillow he could see Ron's deserted bunk. It was like a dead body in the way it seemed to draw his eyes. Harry jumped down from his own bed, keeping his eyes averted from Ron's. Hermione, who was already busy in the kitchen, did not wish Harry good morning, but turned her face away quickly as he went by.

He's gone, Harry told himself. *He's gone*. He had to keep thinking it as he washed and dressed, as though repetition would dull the shock of it. *He's gone and he's not coming back*. And that was the

simple truth of it, Harry knew, because their protective enchantments meant that it would be impossible, once they vacated this spot, for Ron to find them again.

He and Hermione ate breakfast in silence. Hermione's eyes were puffy and red; she looked as if she had not slept. They packed up their things, Hermione dawdling. Harry knew why she wanted to spin out their time on the riverbank; several times he saw her look up eagerly, and he was sure she had deluded herself into thinking that she heard footsteps through the heavy rain, but no red-haired figure appeared between the trees. Every time Harry imitated her, looked around (for he could not help hoping a little, himself) and saw nothing but rain-swept woods, another little parcel of fury exploded inside him. He could hear Ron saying, *"We thought you knew what you were doing!"*, and he resumed packing with a hard knot in the pit of his stomach.

The muddy river beside them was rising rapidly and would soon spill over onto their bank. They had lingered a good hour after they would usually have departed their campsite. Finally having entirely repacked the beaded bag three times, Hermione seemed unable to find any more reasons to delay: She and Harry grasped hands and Disapparated, reappearing on a windswept heather-covered hillside.

The instant they arrived, Hermione dropped Harry's hand and walked away from him, finally sitting down on a large rock, her face on her knees, shaking with what he knew were sobs. He watched her, supposing that he ought to go and comfort her, but something kept him rooted to the spot. Everything inside him felt cold and tight: Again he saw the contemptuous expression on Ron's face. Harry strode off

through the heather, walking in a large circle with the distraught Hermione at its center, casting the spells she usually performed to ensure their protection.

They did not discuss Ron at all over the next few days. Harry was determined never to mention his name again, and Hermione seemed to know that it was no use forcing the issue, although sometimes at night when she thought he was sleeping, he would hear her crying. Meanwhile Harry had started bringing out the Marauder's Map and examining it by wandlight. He was waiting for the moment when Ron's labeled dot would reappear in the corridors of Hogwarts, proving that he had returned to the comfortable castle, protected by his status of pureblood. However, Ron did not appear on the map, and after a while Harry found himself taking it out simply to stare at Ginny's name in the girls' dormitory, wondering whether the intensity with which he gazed at it might break into her sleep, that she would somehow know he was thinking about her, hoping that she was all right.

By day, they devoted themselves to trying to determine the possible locations of Gryffindor's sword, but the more they talked about the places in which Dumbledore might have hidden it, the more desperate and far-fetched their speculation became. Cudgel his brains though he might, Harry could not remember Dumbledore ever mentioning a place in which he might hide something. There were moments when he did not know whether he was angrier with Ron or with Dumbledore. *We thought you knew what you were doing. . . . We thought Dumbledore had told you what to do. . . . We thought you had a real plan!*

He could not hide it from himself: Ron had been right. Dumbledore had left him with virtually nothing. They had discovered one Horcrux, but they had no means of destroying it: The others were as unattainable as they had ever been. Hopelessness threatened to engulf him. He was staggered now to think of his own presumption in accepting his friends' offers to accompany him on this meandering, pointless journey. He knew nothing, he had no ideas, and he was constantly, painfully on the alert for any indication that Hermione too was about to tell him that she had had enough, that she was leaving.

They were spending many evenings in near silence, and Hermione took to bringing out Phineas Nigellus's portrait and propping it up in a chair, as though he might fill part of the gaping hole left by Ron's departure. Despite his previous assertion that he would never visit them again, Phineas Nigellus did not seem able to resist the chance to find out more about what Harry was up to, and consented to reappear, blindfolded, every few days or so. Harry was even glad to see him, because he was company, albeit of a snide and taunting kind. They relished any news about what was happening at Hogwarts, though Phineas Nigellus was not an ideal informer. He venerated Snape, the first Slytherin headmaster since he himself had controlled the school, and they had to be careful not to criticize or ask impertinent questions about Snape, or Phineas Nigellus would instantly leave his painting.

However, he did let drop certain snippets. Snape seemed to be facing a constant, low level of mutiny from a hard core of students. Ginny had been banned from going into Hogsmeade. Snape had reinstated Umbridge's old decree forbidding gatherings of three or more students or any unofficial student societies.

From all of these things, Harry deduced that Ginny, and probably Neville and Luna along with her, had been doing their best to continue Dumbledore's Army. This scant news made Harry want to see Ginny so badly it felt like a stomachache; but it also made him think of Ron again, and of Dumbledore, and of Hogwarts itself, which he missed nearly as much as his ex-girlfriend. Indeed, as Phineas Nigellus talked about Snape's crackdown, Harry experienced a split second of madness when he imagined simply going back to school to join the destabilization of Snape's regime: Being fed, and having a soft bed, and other people being in charge, seemed the most wonderful prospect in the world at that moment. But then he remembered that he was Undesirable Number One, that there was a ten-thousand-Galleon price on his head, and that to walk into Hogwarts these days was just as dangerous as walking into the Ministry of Magic. Indeed, Phineas Nigellus inadvertently emphasized this fact by slipping in leading questions about Harry and Hermione's whereabouts. Hermione shoved him back inside the beaded bag every time he did this, and Phineas Nigellus invariably refused to reappear for several days after these unceremonious good-byes.

The weather grew colder and colder. They did not dare remain in any one area too long, so rather than staying in the south of England, where a hard ground frost was the worst of their worries, they continued to meander up and down the country, braving a mountainside, where sleet pounded the tent; a wide, flat marsh, where the tent was flooded with chill water; and a tiny island in the middle of a Scottish loch, where snow half buried the tent in the

night.

They had already spotted Christmas trees twinkling from several sitting room windows before there came an evening when Harry resolved to suggest, again, what seemed to him the only unexplored avenue left to them. They had just eaten an unusually good meal: Hermione had been to a supermarket under the Invisibility Cloak (scrupulously dropping the money into an open till as she left), and Harry thought that she might be more persuadable than usual on a stomach full of spaghetti Bolognese and tinned pears. He had also had the foresight to suggest that they take a few hours' break from wearing the Horcrux, which was hanging over the end of the bunk beside him.

"Hermione?"

"Hmm?" She was curled up in one of the sagging armchairs with *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. He could not imagine how much more she could get out of the book, which was not, after all, very long; but evidently she was still deciphering something in it, because *Spellman's Syllabary* lay open on the arm of the chair.

Harry cleared his throat. He felt exactly as he had done on the occasion, several years previously, when he had asked Professor McGonagall whether he could go into Hogsmeade, despite the fact that he had not persuaded the Dursleys to sign his permission slip.

"Hermione, I've been thinking, and —"

"Harry, could you help me with something?"

Apparently she had not been listening to him. She leaned forward and held out *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*.

"Look at that symbol," she said, pointing to the top of a page.

Above what Harry assumed was the title of the story (being unable to read runes, he could not be sure), there was a picture of what looked like a triangular eye, its pupil crossed with a vertical line.

"I never took Ancient Runes, Hermione."

"I know that, but it isn't a rune and it's not in the syllabary, either. All along I thought it was a picture of an eye, but I don't think it is! It's been inked in, look, somebody's drawn it there, it isn't really part of the book. Think, have you ever seen it before?"

"No . . . No, wait a moment." Harry looked closer. "Isn't it the same symbol Luna's dad was wearing round his neck?"

"Well, that's what I thought too!"

"Then it's Grindelwald's mark."

She stared at him, openmouthed.

"What?"

"Krum told me . . ."

He recounted the story that Viktor Krum had told him at the wedding. Hermione looked astonished.

"*Grindelwald's* mark?"

She looked from Harry to the weird symbol and back again. "I've never heard that Grindelwald had a mark. There's no mention of it in anything I've ever read about him."

"Well, like I say, Krum reckoned that symbol was carved on a wall at Durmstrang, and Grindelwald put it there."

She fell back into the old armchair, frowning.

"That's very odd. If it's a symbol of Dark Magic, what's it doing in a book of children's stories?"

"Yeah, it is weird," said Harry. "And you'd think Scrimgeour would have recognized it. He was Minister, he ought to have been expert on Dark stuff."

"I know. . . . Perhaps he thought it was an eye, just like I did. All the other stories have little pictures over the titles."

She did not speak, but continued to pore over the strange mark. Harry tried again.

"Hermione?"

"Hmm?"

"I've been thinking. I — I want to go to Godric's Hollow."

She looked up at him, but her eyes were unfocused, and he was sure she was still thinking about the mysterious mark on the book.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I've been wondering that too. I really think we'll have to."

"Did you hear me right?" he asked.

"Of course I did. You want to go to Godric's Hollow. I agree, I think we should. I mean, I can't think of anywhere else it could be either. It'll be dangerous, but the more I think about it, the more likely it seems it's there."

"Er — *what's* there?" asked Harry.

At that, she looked just as bewildered as he felt.

"Well, the sword, Harry! Dumbledore must have known you'd want to go back there, and I mean, Godric's Hollow is Godric Gryffindor's birthplace —"

"Really? Gryffindor came from Godric's Hollow?"

"Harry, did you ever even open *A History of Magic*?"

"Erm," he said, smiling for what felt like the first time in months: The muscles in his face felt oddly stiff. "I might've opened it, you know, when I bought it . . . just the once. . . ."

"Well, as the village is named after him I'd have thought you might have made the connection," said Hermione. She sounded much more like her old self than she had done of late; Harry half expected her to announce that she was off to the library. "There's a bit about the village in *A History of Magic,* wait . . ."

She opened the beaded bag and rummaged for a while, finally extracting her copy of their old school textbook, *A History of Magic* by Bathilda Bagshot, which she thumbed through until finding the page she wanted.

"'Upon the signature of the International Statute of Secrecy in 1689, wizards went into hiding for good. It was natural, perhaps, that they formed their own small communities within a community. Many small villages and hamlets attracted several magical families, who banded together for mutual support and protection. The villages of Tinworth in Cornwall, Upper Flagley in Yorkshire, and Ottery St. Catchpole on the south coast of England were notable homes to knots of Wizarding families who lived alongside tolerant and sometimes Confunded Muggles. Most celebrated of these half-magical dwelling places is, perhaps, Godric's Hollow, the West Country village where the great wizard Godric Gryffindor was born, and where Bowman Wright, Wizarding smith, forged the first Golden Snitch. The graveyard is full of the names of ancient magical families, and this accounts, no doubt, for the stories of hauntings that have dogged the little church beside it for many

centuries.'

"You and your parents aren't mentioned," Hermione said, closing the book, "because Professor Bagshot doesn't cover anything later than the end of the nineteenth century. But you see? Godric's Hollow, Godric Gryffindor, Gryffindor's sword; don't you think Dumbledore would have expected you to make the connection?"

"Oh yeah . . ."

Harry did not want to admit that he had not been thinking about the sword at all when he suggested they go to Godric's Hollow. For him, the lure of the village lay in his parents' graves, the house where he had narrowly escaped death, and in the person of Bathilda Bagshot.

"Remember what Muriel said?" he asked eventually.

"Who?"

"You know," he hesitated: He did not want to say Ron's name. "Ginny's great-aunt. At the wedding. The one who said you had skinny ankles."

"Oh," said Hermione. It was a sticky moment: Harry knew that she had sensed Ron's name in the offing. He rushed on:

"She said Bathilda Bagshot still lives in Godric's Hollow."

"Bathilda Bagshot," murmured Hermione, running her index finger over Bathilda's embossed name on the front cover of *A History of Magic*. "Well, I suppose —"

She gasped so dramatically that Harry's insides turned over; he drew his wand, looking around at the entrance, half expecting to see a hand forcing its way through the entrance flap, but there was nothing there.

"What?" he said, half angry, half relieved. "What did you do that

for? I thought you'd seen a Death Eater unzipping the tent, at least —"

"Harry, *what if Bathilda's got the sword*? What if Dumbledore entrusted it to her?"

Harry considered this possibility. Bathilda would be an extremely old woman by now, and according to Muriel, she was "gaga." Was it likely that Dumbledore would have hidden the sword of Gryffindor with her? If so, Harry felt that Dumbledore had left a great deal to chance: Dumbledore had never revealed that he had replaced the sword with a fake, nor had he so much as mentioned a friendship with Bathilda. Now, however, was not the moment to cast doubt on Hermione's theory, not when she was so surprisingly willing to fall in with Harry's dearest wish.

"Yeah, he might have done! So, are we going to go to Godric's Hollow?"

"Yes, but we'll have to think it through carefully, Harry." She was sitting up now, and Harry could tell that the prospect of having a plan again had lifted her mood as much as his. "We'll need to practice Disapparating together under the Invisibility Cloak for a start, and perhaps Disillusionment Charms would be sensible too, unless you think we should go the whole hog and use Polyjuice Potion? In that case we'll need to collect hair from somebody. I actually think we'd better do that, Harry, the thicker our disguises the better. . . ."

Harry let her talk, nodding and agreeing whenever there was a pause, but his mind had left the conversation. For the first time since he had discovered that the sword in Gringotts was a fake, he felt excited.

He was about to go home, about to return to the place where he

had had a family. It was in Godric's Hollow that, but for Voldemort, he would have grown up and spent every school holiday. He could have invited friends to his house . . . He might even have had brothers and sisters . . . It would have been his mother who had made his seventeenth birthday cake. The life he had lost had hardly ever seemed so real to him as at this moment, when he knew he was about to see the place where it had been taken from him. After Hermione had gone to bed that night, Harry quietly extracted his rucksack from Hermione's beaded bag, and from inside it, the photograph album Hagrid had given him so long ago. For the first time in months, he perused the old pictures of his parents, smiling and waving up at him from the images, which were all he had left of them now.

Harry would gladly have set out for Godric's Hollow the following day, but Hermione had other ideas. Convinced as she was that Voldemort would expect Harry to return to the scene of his parents' deaths, she was determined that they would set off only after they had ensured that they had the best disguises possible. It was therefore a full week later — once they had surreptitiously obtained hairs from innocent Muggles who were Christmas shopping, and had practiced Apparating and Disapparating while underneath the Invisibility Cloak together — that Hermione agreed to make the journey.

They were to Apparate to the village under cover of darkness, so it was late afternoon when they finally swallowed Polyjuice Potion, Harry transforming into a balding, middle-aged Muggle man, Hermione into his small and rather mousy wife. The beaded bag containing all of their possessions (apart from the Horcrux, which

Harry was wearing around his neck) was tucked into an inside pocket of Hermione's buttoned-up coat. Harry lowered the Invisibility Cloak over them, then they turned into the suffocating darkness once again.

Heart beating in his throat, Harry opened his eyes. They were standing hand in hand in a snowy lane under a dark blue sky, in which the night's first stars were already glimmering feebly. Cottages stood on either side of the narrow road, Christmas decorations twinkling in their windows. A short way ahead of them, a glow of golden streetlights indicated the center of the village.

"All this snow!" Hermione whispered beneath the cloak. "Why didn't we think of snow? After all our precautions, we'll leave prints! We'll just have to get rid of them — you go in front, I'll do it —"

Harry did not want to enter the village like a pantomime horse, trying to keep themselves concealed while magically covering their traces.

"Let's take off the Cloak," said Harry, and when she looked frightened, "Oh, come on, we don't look like us and there's no one around."

He stowed the Cloak under his jacket and they made their way forward unhampered, the icy air stinging their faces as they passed more cottages: Any one of them might have been the one in which James and Lily had once lived or where Bathilda lived now. Harry gazed at the front doors, their snow-burdened roofs, and their front porches, wondering whether he remembered any of them, knowing deep inside that it was impossible, that he had been little more than a year old when he had left this place forever. He was not even sure

whether he would be able to see the cottage at all; he did not know what happened when the subjects of a Fidelius Charm died. Then the little lane along which they were walking curved to the left and the heart of the village, a small square, was revealed to them.

Strung all around with colored lights, there was what looked like a war memorial in the middle, partly obscured by a windblown Christmas tree. There were several shops, a post office, a pub, and a little church whose stained-glass windows were glowing jewel-bright across the square.

The snow here had become impacted: It was hard and slippery where people had trodden on it all day. Villagers were crisscrossing in front of them, their figures briefly illuminated by streetlamps. They heard a snatch of laughter and pop music as the pub door opened and closed; then they heard a carol start up inside the little church.

"Harry, I think it's Christmas Eve!" said Hermione.

"Is it?"

He had lost track of the date; they had not seen a newspaper for weeks.

"I'm sure it is," said Hermione, her eyes upon the church. "They . . . they'll be in there, won't they? Your mum and dad? I can see the graveyard behind it."

Harry felt a thrill of something that was beyond excitement, more like fear. Now that he was so near, he wondered whether he wanted to see after all. Perhaps Hermione knew how he was feeling, because she reached for his hand and took the lead for the first time, pulling him forward. Halfway across the square, however, she stopped dead.

"Harry, look!"

She was pointing at the war memorial. As they had passed it, it had transformed. Instead of an obelisk covered in names, there was a statue of three people: a man with untidy hair and glasses, a woman with long hair and a kind, pretty face, and a baby boy sitting in his mother's arms. Snow lay upon all their heads, like fluffy white caps.

Harry drew closer, gazing up into his parents' faces. He had never imagined that there would be a statue. . . . How strange it was to see himself represented in stone, a happy baby without a scar on his forehead. . . .

"C'mon," said Harry, when he had looked his fill, and they turned again toward the church. As they crossed the road, he glanced over his shoulder; the statue had turned back into the war memorial.

The singing grew louder as they approached the church. It made Harry's throat constrict, it reminded him so forcefully of Hogwarts, of Peeves bellowing rude versions of carols from inside suits of armor, of the Great Hall's twelve Christmas trees, of Dumbledore wearing a bonnet he had won in a cracker, of Ron in a hand-knitted sweater. . . .

There was a kissing gate at the entrance to the graveyard. Hermione pushed it open as quietly as possible and they edged through it. On either side of the slippery path to the church doors, the snow lay deep and untouched. They moved off through the snow, carving deep trenches behind them as they walked around the building, keeping to the shadows beneath the brilliant windows.

Behind the church, row upon row of snowy tombstones protruded from a blanket of pale blue that was flecked with dazzling red, gold, and green wherever the reflections from the stained glass hit the

snow. Keeping his hand closed tightly on the wand in his jacket pocket, Harry moved toward the nearest grave.

"Look at this, it's an Abbott, could be some long-lost relation of Hannah's!"

"Keep your voice down," Hermione begged him.

They waded deeper and deeper into the graveyard, gouging dark tracks into the snow behind them, stooping to peer at the words on old headstones, every now and then squinting into the surrounding darkness to make absolutely sure that they were unaccompanied.

"Harry, here!"

Hermione was two rows of tombstones away; he had to wade back to her, his heart positively banging in his chest.

"Is it — ?"

"No, but look!"

She pointed to the dark stone. Harry stooped down and saw, upon the frozen, lichen-spotted granite, the words KENDRA DUMBLEDORE and, a short way below her dates of birth and death, AND HER DAUGHTER ARIANA. There was also a quotation:

Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

So Rita Skeeter and Muriel had got some of their facts right. The Dumbledore family had indeed lived here, and part of it had died here.

Seeing the grave was worse than hearing about it. Harry could not help thinking that he and Dumbledore both had deep roots in this graveyard, and that Dumbledore ought to have told him so, yet he had

never thought to share the connection. They could have visited the place together; for a moment Harry imagined coming here with Dumbledore, of what a bond that would have been, of how much it would have meant to him. But it seemed that to Dumbledore, the fact that their families lay side by side in the same graveyard had been an unimportant coincidence, irrelevant, perhaps, to the job he wanted Harry to do.

Hermione was looking at Harry, and he was glad that his face was hidden in shadow. He read the words on the tombstone again. *Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.* He did not understand what these words meant. Surely Dumbledore had chosen them, as the eldest member of the family once his mother had died.

"Are you sure he never mentioned — ?" Hermione began.

"No," said Harry curtly, then, "let's keep looking," and he turned away, wishing he had not seen the stone: He did not want his excited trepidation tainted with resentment.

"Here!" cried Hermione again a few moments later from out of the darkness. "Oh no, sorry! I thought it said Potter."

She was rubbing at a crumbling, mossy stone, gazing down at it, a little frown on her face.

"Harry, come back a moment."

He did not want to be sidetracked again, and only grudgingly made his way back through the snow toward her.

"What?"

"Look at this!"

The grave was extremely old, weathered so that Harry could hardly make out the name. Hermione showed him the symbol beneath

it.

"Harry, that's the mark in the book!"

He peered at the place she indicated: The stone was so worn that it was hard to make out what was engraved there, though there did seem to be a triangular mark beneath the nearly illegible name.

"Yeah . . . it could be. . . ."

Hermione lit her wand and pointed it at the name on the headstone.

"It says Ig — Ignotus, I think. . . ."

"I'm going to keep looking for my parents, all right?" Harry told her, a slight edge to his voice, and he set off again, leaving her crouched beside the old grave.

Every now and then he recognized a surname that, like Abbott, he had met at Hogwarts. Sometimes there were several generations of the same Wizarding family represented in the graveyard: Harry could tell from the dates that it had either died out, or the current members had moved away from Godric's Hollow. Deeper and deeper amongst the graves he went, and every time he reached a new headstone he felt a little lurch of apprehension and anticipation.

The darkness and the silence seemed to become, all of a sudden, much deeper. Harry looked around, worried, thinking of dementors, then realized that the carols had finished, that the chatter and flurry of churchgoers were fading away as they made their way back into the square. Somebody inside the church had just turned off the lights.

Then Hermione's voice came out of the blackness for the third time, sharp and clear from a few yards away.

"Harry, they're here . . . right here."

And he knew by her tone that it was his mother and father this

time: He moved toward her, feeling as if something heavy were pressing on his chest, the same sensation he had had right after Dumbledore had died, a grief that had actually weighed on his heart and lungs.

The headstone was only two rows behind Kendra and Ariana's. It was made of white marble, just like Dumbledore's tomb, and this made it easy to read, as it seemed to shine in the dark. Harry did not need to kneel or even approach very close to it to make out the words engraved upon it.

JAMES POTTER	LILY POTTER
BORN 27 MARCH 1960	BORN 30 JANUARY 1960
DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981	DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981

The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

Harry read the words slowly, as though he would have only one chance to take in their meaning, and he read the last of them aloud.

"'The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death' . . ." A horrible thought came to him, and with it a kind of panic. "Isn't that a Death Eater idea? Why is that there?"

"It doesn't mean defeating death in the way the Death Eaters mean it, Harry," said Hermione, her voice gentle. "It means . . . you know . . . living beyond death. Living after death."

But they were not living, thought Harry: They were gone. The empty words could not disguise the fact that his parents' moldering remains lay beneath snow and stone, indifferent, unknowing. And tears came before he could stop them, boiling hot then instantly freezing on his face, and what was the point in wiping them off or

pretending? He let them fall, his lips pressed hard together, looking down at the thick snow hiding from his eyes the place where the last of Lily and James lay, bones now, surely, or dust, not knowing or caring that their living son stood so near, his heart still beating, alive because of their sacrifice and close to wishing, at this moment, that he was sleeping under the snow with them.

Hermione had taken his hand again and was gripping it tightly. He could not look at her, but returned the pressure, now taking deep, sharp gulps of the night air, trying to steady himself, trying to regain control. He should have brought something to give them, and he had not thought of it, and every plant in the graveyard was leafless and frozen. But Hermione raised her wand, moved it in a circle through the air, and a wreath of Christmas roses blossomed before them. Harry caught it and laid it on his parents' grave.

As soon as he stood up he wanted to leave: He did not think he could stand another moment there. He put his arm around Hermione's shoulders, and she put hers around his waist, and they turned in silence and walked away through the snow, past Dumbledore's mother and sister, back toward the dark church and the out-of-sight kissing gate.

Godric's Hollow

Toe Harry die volgende dag wakker word, duur dit 'n hele paar sekondes voor hy onthou wat gebeur het. Dan hoop hy soos 'n kind dit was net 'n droom, dat Ron nog steeds hier is en nie weggegaan het nie. Maar toe hy sy kop op sy kussing draai, sien hy Ron se slaapbank is leeg. Dit is soos 'n dooie liggaam wat sy oë aanhoudend soontoe wil trek. Harry spring van sy boonste bed af en kyk weg van Ron s'n. Hermione, wat al klaar in die kombuis besig is, sê nie vir Harry môre nie en draai haar gesig vinnig weg toe hy verbyloop.

Hy's weg, sê Harry vir homself. *Hy's weg*. Hy dink dit oor en oor terwyl hy hom was en aantrek, asof die herhaling die skok sal verdoof. *Hy's weg en hy gaan nie terugkom nie*. En Harry weet dit is 'n voldonge feit, want hulle beskermende paljasse sal dit vir Ron onmoontlik maak om hulle weer op te spoor as hulle eers hier weg is.

Hy en Hermione eet ontbyt in stilte. Haar oë is opgeswel en rooi; dit lyk asof sy nie geslaap het nie. Hulle begin hul goed oppak, maar Hermione draai. Harry weet hoekom sy hulle tyd hier op die rivieroewer so lank moontlik wil uitrek; hy sien 'n paar keer hoe sy gretig opkyk en hy is seker sy probeer haar wysmaak sy hoor voetstappe deur die swaar reën, maar daar verskyn geen rooikopfiguur tussen die bome nie. Elke keer dat Harry net soos sy omkyk (want hy kan nie help om self 'n bietjie te hoop nie) en niks behalwe die natgereënde woud sien nie, ontplof daar nog 'n sarsie woede binne-in hom. Hy hoor Ron weer sê: *"Ons het gedink jy weet wat jy doen!"* en dan pak hy verder in met 'n knop op sy maag.

Die modderige rivier langs hulle styg vinnig en gaan hul oewer binnekort oorspoel. Hulle vertoef ten minste 'n uur langer as wat dit hulle gewoonlik neem om 'n kampeerterrein te ontruim. Uiteindelik, nadat sy die kraletjiehandsak drie keer oorgepak het, kan Hermione nie meer aan redes dink om verder uit te stel nie: sy en Harry hou hande vas, Disappareer en verskyn weer op 'n windverwaaide heuwel wat met heide oortrek is.

Die oomblik dat hulle daar aankom, los Hermione Harry se hand en loop weg van hom af. Sy gaan sit op 'n groot klip met haar gesig op haar knieë en haar skouers ruk van wat hy weet snikke is. Hy hou haar dop en weet hy behoort haar te gaan troos, maar iets hou hom vasgenael. Alles binne-in hom voel koud en styf: hy sien weer die minagtende uitdrukking op Ron se gesig. Harry stap weg deur die heide; hy loop in 'n wye sirkel met die radelose Hermione as middelpunt en prewel die towerspreuke wat sy gewoonlik opstel om hulle te beskerm.

Hulle praat die volgende paar dae glad nie oor Ron nie. Harry is vasberade om nooit weer sy naam te noem nie, en Hermione weet blykbaar dit gaan nie help om hom te probeer dwing om daaroor te praat nie, hoewel hy haar soms snags hoor huil wanneer sy dink hy slaap. Intussen begin Harry die Plunderaar se Kaart uithaal en dit by sy towerstaflig bestudeer. Hy wag vir die oomblik wanneer die kolletjie met Ron se naam weer in Hogwarts se gange verskyn; dit sal bewys hy het teruggegaan na die gerieflike kasteel, beskerm deur sy status as suiwerbloed. Ron verskyn egter nie op die kaart nie, en ná 'n ruk kom Harry agter hy haal dit eintlik net uit sodat hy na Ginny se naam in die meisies se slaapsaal kan staar, en hy wonder of die intensiteit waarmee hy dit doen miskien deur haar slaap kan dring sodat sy op 'n manier sal weet hy dink aan haar en hoop dit gaan goed met haar.

Bedags bestee hulle die meeste van hulle tyd daaraan om te probeer uitwerk waar Gryffindor se swaard moontlik kan wees, maar hoe meer hulle praat oor die plekke waar Dumbledore dit dalk kon weggesteek het, hoe meer desperaat en vergesog word hulle bespiegelinge. Al breek Harry sy kop ook hoe, kan hy nie onthou dat Dumbledore ooit 'n plek genoem het waar hy miskien iets kon weggesteek het nie. Daar is oomblikke dat hy nie weet vir wie hy die kwaadste is nie: vir Ron of vir Dumbledore. *Ons het gedink jy weet wat jy doen . . . Ons het gedink Dumbledore het vir jou gesê wat om te doen . . . Ons het gedink jy't 'n ordentlike plan!*

Hy moet dit aan homself erken: Ron was reg. Dumbledore het hom met feitlik niks agtergelaat nie. Hulle het een Horcrux gekry, maar het nie 'n benul hoe om dit te vernietig nie, en die ander is nog net so buite hulle bereik soos vroeër. Moedeloosheid dreig om hom te oorweldig. Hy is nou verstom om te dink hy was so vermetel om sy vriende se aanbod te aanvaar om hierdie dwaalspoor en sinlose reis saam met hom aan te pak. Hy weet niks nie, het geen planne nie en is gedurig pynlik op sy hoede vir enige teken dat Hermione ook op die punt is om vir hom te sê sy het genoeg gehad en wil weggaan.

Hulle bring al hoe meer aande in amperse stilte deur en Hermione begin 'n gewoonte daarvan maak om Phineas Nigellus se portret uit te haal en dit op 'n stoel neer te sit asof hy die gapende leemte ná Ron se vertrek kan vul. Ten spyte van sy vorige verklaring dat hy hulle nooit weer sal besoek nie, kan Phineas Nigellus blykbaar nie die versoeking weerstaan om meer uit te vind oor Harry se doen en late nie en stem hy elke paar dae of so in om weer geblinddoek te verskyn. Harry is selfs bly om hom te sien, want hy is geselskap, al is dit snedig en uittartend. Hulle skep behae in enige nuus oor wat in Hogwarts aangaan, hoewel Phineas Nigellus nie 'n ideale informant is nie. Hy het 'n groot verering vir Snape, die eerste Slytherin-skoolhoof sedert hy self die skool beheer het, en hulle moet versigtig wees om Snape nie te kritiseer of voorbarige vrae oor hom te vra nie, anders gee Phineas Nigellus onmiddellik pad uit sy portret.

Hy laat val egter wel 'n paar brokkies. Snape het blykbaar konstant te kampe met 'n subtiele muitery aangevoer deur 'n kerngroep hardnekkige studente. Ginny is verbied om Hogsmeade toe te gaan. Snape het Umbridge se ou dekreet wat byeenkomste van drie of meer studente of enige nieamptelike studenteorganisasies verbied, weer van krag gemaak.

Uit al hierdie dinge lei Harry af dat Ginny, waarskynlik saam met Neville en Luna, haar bes doen om Dumbledore se Soldate paraat te hou. Hierdie karige nuus maak Harry so desperaat om Ginny te sien dat dit soos 'n pyn op sy maag voel, maar dit laat hom ook weer aan Ron dink, en aan Dumbledore, en aan Hogwarts self wat hy amper net so baie soos sy eks-meisie mis. Om die waarheid te sê, toe Phineas Nigellus van Snape se sterk optrede praat, ervaar Harry 'n oomblik van waansin waarin hy eenvoudig terug skool toe wil gaan om Snape se regime te help destabiliseer; om te kan aansit vir ete en 'n sagte bed te hê, om die beheer aan ander mense oor te laat, voel op hierdie oomblik na die wonderlikste vooruitsig ter wêreld. Maar dan onthou Harry hy is Ongewenste Nommer Een, dat daar 'n prys van tienduisend Galjoene op sy kop is, en dat dit deesdae vir hom net so gevaarlik is om by Hogwarts in te stap as by die Ministerie van Towerkuns. Phineas Nigellus beklemtoon hierdie feit onbewustelik met uitlokkende vrae oor waar Harry en Hermione hulle bevind. Elke keer dat hy dit doen, prop Hermione hom terug in die kraletjiehandsak en ná sulke onbeleefde behandeling weier Phineas Nigellus sonder uitsondering 'n paar dae lank om weer te verskyn.

Die weer word kouer en kouer. Hulle kan dit nie waag om te lank in een gebied te vertoef nie, so eerder as om in die suide van Engeland te bly waar harde ryp hulle grootste vyand is, gaan hulle

voort om op en af in die land rond te trek. Hulle trotseer 'n berghang waar ysreën die tent moker, 'n breë, plat moeras waar ysige water die tent oorstroom en 'n piepklein eilandjie in die middel van 'n Skotse meer waar die tent die nag halfpad onder sneeu begrawe word.

Hulle het reeds in verskeie sitkamers se vensters Kersbome sien glinster toe Harry op 'n aand besluit om weer eens 'n voorstel te maak wat volgens hom die enigste moontlikheid is wat hulle nog nie ondersoek het nie. Hulle het so pas 'n buitengewoon lekker maaltyd geniet: Hermione is onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel na 'n supermark toe (sy het die geld op pad uit nougeset by 'n oop kasregister ingegooi) en Harry dink dit sal dalk makliker as gewoonlik wees om haar te oortuig noudat haar maag vol spaghetti bolognese en ingemaakte pere is. Hy was ook versiende genoeg om voor te stel dat hulle die Horcrux, wat nou oor die rand van die slaapbank langs hom hang, 'n paar uur lank nie dra nie.

"Hermione?"

"Hm?" Sy lê opgekrul in een van die ingesakte leunstoele met *Die Verhale van Beedle die Skrywer*. Hy kan nie dink hoeveel meer sy nog kan put uit die boek wat nie eintlik baie dik is nie, maar sy is duidelik nog besig om iets daarin te ontsyfer, want haar *Spelsillabarium* lê oop op die stoel se armleuning.

Harry maak keel skoon. Hy voel presies soos die keer, 'n hele paar jaar gelede, toe hy vir professor McGonagall gevra het of hy Hogsmeade toe kan gaan ten spyte van die feit dat hy die Dursleys nie kon oortuig om sy verlofstrokie te teken nie.

"Hermione, ek het weer gedink en –"

"Harry, kan jy my met iets help?"

Sy het klaarblyklik nie na hom geluister nie. Sy leun vorentoe en hou *Die Verhale van Beedle die Skrywer* na hom toe uit.

"Kyk na hierdie simbool," sê sy en wys na die bokant van die bladsy. Bo wat Harry aanneem die titel van die storie is (hy kan nie runes lees nie, dus is hy nie seker nie), is daar 'n prentjie van iets wat lyk soos 'n driehoekige oog met 'n vertikale streep deur die pupil.

"Ek het nooit Antieke Runes gedoen nie, Hermione."

"Ek weet, maar dis nie 'n rune nie en dis ook nie in die sillabarium nie. Ek het heeltyd gedink dis 'n prentjie van 'n oog, maar ek dink nie meer so nie! Dit is hier ingesit, kyk, iemand het dit met 'n pen hier geteken, dis nie regtig deel van die boek nie. Dink mooi, het jy dit al ooit voorheen gesien?"

"Nee . . . nee, wag 'n bietjie." Harry bekyk dit van nader. "Is dit nie dieselfde simbool as wat Luna se pa om sy nek gedra het nie?"

"Ja, dis wat ek ook gedink het!"
"Dan is dit Grindelwald se teken."
Sy gaap hom oopmond aan.
"*Wat?*"
"Krum het vir my gesê . . ."
Hy vertel vir haar die storie wat hy op die troue by Viktor Krum gehoor het. Hermione lyk verstom.
"*Grindelwald* se teken?"
Sy kyk van Harry na die vreemde simbool en weer terug. "Ek het nog nooit gehoor dat Grindelwald 'n teken gehad het nie. Dit word nêrens genoem in enigiets wat ek nog ooit oor hom gelees het nie."
"Wel, soos ek sê, Krum sê daai simbool is op 'n muur in Durmstrang uitgekrap en dat dit Grindelwald se werk was."
Sy sak terug in die leunstoel en frons.
"Dis baie eienaardig. As dit 'n simbool van Donker Kuns is, wat doen dit in 'n storieboek vir kinders?"
"Ja, dit is vreemd," sê Harry. "En 'n mens sal dink Scrimgeour sou dit herken het. Hy was die Minister; hy was tog seker 'n kenner van Donker goed."
"Ek weet . . . miskien het hy gedink dis net 'n oog, nes ek. Al die ander stories het prentjies bokant die titels."
Sy praat nie, maar hou aan om die vreemde teken te bestudeer. Harry probeer 'n tweede keer.
"Hermione?"
"Hm?"
"Ek het weer gedink. Ek – ek wil Godric's Hollow toe gaan."
Sy kyk op na hom, maar haar oë bly ongefokus en hy is seker sy dink nog steeds aan die geheimsinnige teken in die boek.
"Ja," sê sy. "Ja, ek het ook daaroor gewonder. Ek dink regtig ons moet."
"Het jy my reg gehoor?" vra hy.
"Natuurlik het ek. Jy wil Godric's Hollow toe gaan. Ek stem saam, ek dink ons moet dit doen. Ek bedoel, ek kan ook nie dink waar anders dit kan wees nie. Dit gaan gevaarlik wees, maar hoe meer ek daaroor dink, hoe meer dink ek dis daar."
"E – *wat* is daar?" vra Harry.
Sy lyk nou net so verward as wat hy voel.
"Wel, die swaard, Harry! Dumbledore moet geweet het jy sal soontoe wil teruggaan, en ek bedoel, Godric's Hollow is Godric Gryffindor se geboorteplek –"
"Regtig? Het Gryffindor van Godric's Hollow af gekom?"
"Harry, het jy '*n Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns* ooit oopgemaak?"

"Em," sê hy en glimlag vir wat soos die eerste keer in maande voel: die spiere in sy gesig voel vreemd styf. "Ek het dit dalk oopgemaak, weet jy, toe ek dit gekoop het . . . net daardie een keer . . ."

"Wel, aangesien die dorp na hom vernoem is, het ek gedink jy sou weet daar's 'n verband," sê Hermione. Sy klink baie meer soos haar ou self as die afgelope tyd; Harry verwag half sy gaan aankondig dat sy op pad biblioteek toe is. "Daar's 'n stukkie oor die dorp in *'n Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns*, wag . . ."

Sy maak die kraletjiehandsak oop en krap 'n rukkie daarin rond, dan kry sy uiteindelik haar eksemplaar van hulle ou skoolhandboek, *'n Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns* deur Bathilda Bagshot, haal dit uit en blaai daardeur tot sy die bladsy kry waarna sy soek.

" *'Met die ondertekening van die Internasionale Statuut van Stilswye in 1689 het towenaars vir goed ondergronds gegaan. Dit was seker natuurlik dat hulle hul eie klein gemeenskappe binne 'n groter gemeenskap gevorm het. Baie klein dorpies het verskeie towergesinne gelok wat groepe gevorm het vir wedersydse steun en beskerming. Die dorpies Tinworth in Cornwall, Upper Flagley in Yorkshire en Ottery St Catchpole aan Engeland se suidkus was bekende tuistes vir klompies towergesinne wat tussen verdraagsame en soms Verwarde Moggels gewoon het. Die mees gevierde van hierdie semitower-woonplekke is moontlik Godric's Hollow, die dorpie in die weste waar die groot towenaar Godric Gryffindor gebore is, en waar die towersmid Bowman Wright die eerste Goue Snip gesmee het. Die begraafplaas is vol name van antieke towerfamilies en dit verklaar ongetwyfeld die spookstories wat al eeue lank oor die kerkie vertel word.'*

"Jy en jou ouers word nie genoem nie," sê Hermione toe sy die boek toemaak, "want professor Bagshot dek nie enigiets later as die einde van die negentiende eeu nie. Maar sien jy nou? Godric's Hollow, Godric Gryffindor, Gryffindor se swaard; dink jy nie Dumbledore sou verwag het dat jy die verband sou raak sien nie?"

"O ja . . ."

Harry wil nie erken dat hy glad nie aan die swaard gedink het toe hy voorgestel het hulle moet Godric's Hollow toe gaan nie. Vir hom lê die dorpie se aantrekkingskrag in sy ouers se grafte, in die huis waar hy ternouernood aan die dood ontsnap het, en in Bathilda Bagshot.

"Onthou jy wat Muriel gesê het?" vra hy uiteindelik.

"Wie?"

"Weet jy," hy huiwer; hy wil nie Ron se naam sê nie. "Ginny se groottante. By die troue. Die een wat gesê het jy het maer enkels."

"O," sê Hermione.

Dit is 'n ongemaklike oomblik: Harry weet sy het aangevoel dat Ron se naam aan die kom is. Hy gaan vinnig voort: "Sy't gesê Bathilda Bagshot bly nog steeds in Godric's Hollow."

"Bathilda Bagshot," prewel Hermione en laat gly haar wysvinger oor Bathilda se naam wat in reliëf op die voorblad van *'n Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns* staan. "Wel, ek veronderstel –"

Sy snak so dramaties na asem dat Harry se ingewande 'n draai gee; hy pluk sy towerstaf uit en swaai om na die ingang waar hy verwag om te sien hoe 'n indringer se hand die tentflap opslaan, maar daar is niks nie.

"Wat?" vra hy, half kwaad, half verlig. "Hoekom het jy dit gedoen? Ek dog jy sien ten minste 'n Doodseter wat die tent ooprits –"

"Harry, *wat as Bathilda die swaard het?* Wat as Dumbledore dit aan haar sorg toevertrou het?"

Harry oorweeg hierdie moontlikheid. Bathilda sal teen hierdie tyd 'n geweldige ou dame wees, en volgens Muriel is sy "heeltemal kens". Is dit moontlik dat Dumbledore Gryffindor se swaard by haar kon weggesteek het? As dit waar is, voel Harry Dumbledore het baie aan die toeval oorgelaat: Dumbledore het nooit vir hom gesê hy het die swaard deur 'n vervalste een vervang nie en hy het ook nooit enigiets van 'n vriendskap met Bathilda genoem nie. Dit is egter nie nou die oomblik om twyfel op Hermione se teorie te werp nie, nie noudat sy so verbasend bereid is om by Harry se hartewens in te val nie.

"Ja, hy kon dalk! So gaan ons Godric's Hollow toe?"

"Ja, maar ons sal alles eers baie mooi moet uitwerk, Harry." Sy sit nou regop en Harry kan sien die vooruitsig om weer 'n plan te hê het haar in net so 'n goeie bui gesit as vir hom. "Ons sal om mee te begin, moet oefen om saam onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel te Disappareer, en miskien sal Ontgogelingstowerspreuke ook 'n goeie idee wees, tensy jy dink ons moet dit ordentlik doen en Polisouspaljas gebruik? In daai geval sal ons iemand se hare in die hande moet kry. Ek dink eintlik ons moet dit liewer doen, Harry; hoe deegliker ons vermom is, hoe beter . . ."

Harry laat haar praat; hy knik en stem saam toe daar 'n pouse is, maar sy kop is nie meer by die gesprek nie. Hy voel vir die eerste keer vandat hy uitgevind het die swaard in Gringotts is vervals, opgewonde.

Hy staan op die punt om huis toe te gaan, op die punt om terug te keer na die plek waar hy 'n gesin gehad het. As dit nie vir Voldemort was nie, sou hy in Godric's Hollow grootgeword en elke skoolvakansie daar deurgebring het. Hy sou vriende na sy huis toe

genooi het . . . Hy sou dalk selfs broers en susters gehad het . . . Sy ma sou die koek vir sy sewentiende verjaardag gebak het. Die lewe wat hy verloor het, het nog nooit vantevore vir hom so werklik gevoel soos op hierdie oomblik dat hy weet hy gaan binnekort die plek sien waar dit van hom weggeneem is nie. Nadat Hermione die aand bed toe is, gaan haal Harry sy rugsak stilletjies uit haar kraletjiehandsak en diep die fotoalbum wat Hagrid so lank gelede vir hom gegee het daaruit op. Vir die eerste keer in maande kyk hy na die ou foto's van sy ouers wat vir hom glimlag en waai uit die afbeeldings wat nou al is wat hy van hulle oorhet.

Harry sou graag die volgende dag al Godric's Hollow toe gaan, maar Hermione het ander planne. Sy is seker Voldemort verwag dat Harry na die toneel van sy ouers se dood sal terugkeer en is vasbeslote dat hulle eers kan vertrek nadat hulle seker gemaak het hulle is so deeglik moontlik vermom. Dit is daarom eers 'n hele week later – ná hulle stilletjies onskuldige Moggels wat Kersinkopies doen se hare in die hande gekry en geoefen het om te Appareer en Disappareer terwyl hulle saam onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel is – dat Hermione instem om die reis aan te pak.

Hulle het besluit om onder beskerming van die duisternis na die dorpie toe te Appareer, so hulle drink die Polisouspaljas uiteindelik eers teen laatmiddag. Harry transformeer in 'n bles, middeljarige Moggelman en Hermione in sy klein en taamlik muiserige vroutjie. Die kraletjiehandsak met al hulle besittings (afgesien van die Horcrux wat Harry om sy nek dra) is in 'n binnesak van Hermione se toegeknoopte jas. Harry laat sak die Onsigbaarheidsmantel oor hulle albei en dan tol hulle weer die versmorende duisternis in.

Harry se hart klop in sy keel toe hy sy oë oopmaak. Hulle staan hand in hand in 'n toegesneeude straat onder donkerblou lug waarin die nag se eerste sterre alreeds dof glinster. Aan weerskante van die smal straat is daar kothuise; Kersversierings glinster in hulle vensters. 'n Kort entjie voor hulle wys 'n gloed van goue straatligte waar die middedorp is.

"Al hierdie sneeu!" fluister Hermione onder die Mantel. "Hoekom het ons nie aan sneeu gedink nie? Ná al ons voorbereidings gaan ons nou voetspore los! Ons sal net eenvoudig daarvan ontslae moet raak – loop jy voor, ek sal dit doen –"

Harry wil nie soos 'n perd in 'n pantomime by die dorp ingaan nie; dit gaan beteken hulle moet hulleself versteek en terselfdertyd hulle voetspore met towerkrag uitwis.

"Kom ons haal die Mantel af," sê Harry, en toe sy bang lyk: "Ag

komaan, ons lyk nie na onsself nie, en daar's niemand op straat nie."

Hy steek die Mantel onder sy baadjie in en hulle stap ongehinderd verder. Die ysige wind steek hulle gesigte terwyl hulle verby nog kothuise loop: enigeen daarvan kan die een wees waarin James en Lily gewoon het, of waarin Bathilda nou woon. Harry staar na die voordeure, die sneeubelaaide dakke en die voorstoepe en wonder of hy enige van hulle onthou terwyl hy diep binne-in homself weet dit is onmoontlik, want hy was net ouer as 'n jaar toe hy vir ewig uit hierdie plek weg is. Hy is nie seker of hy die kothuis enigsins sal kan sien nie; hy weet nie wat gebeur wanneer mense wat deur 'n Fideliustowerspreuk beskerm is, doodgaan nie. Dan draai die nou straatjie waarin hulle stap na links en hulle sien die hart van die dorpie, 'n klein plein.

In die middel, deels verberg deur 'n windverwaaide Kersboom, staan daar iets wat soos 'n oorlogsgedenkteken lyk en waarom daar gekleurde liggies gedraai is. Daar is verskeie winkels, 'n poskantoor, 'n kroeg en 'n kerkie met brandskildervensters wat soos blink juweel oor die plein skitter.

Die sneeu is hier al vasgetrap: dit is hard en glad waar mense heeldag daarop geloop het. Dorpenaars vleg voor hulle verby en hulle liggame word vlugtig deur die straatligte verlig. Hulle hoor vir 'n oomblik gelag en popmusiek toe die kroeg se deur oop- en toegaan; dan hoor hulle 'n Kerslied uit die kerkie opklink.

"Harry, ek dink dis Oukersaand!" sê Hermione.

"Is dit?"

Hy het tred verloor met die datum; hulle het weke laas 'n koerant gesien.

"Ek is seker dit is," sê Hermione met haar oë op die kerk. "Hulle . . . hulle sal daar wees, of hoe dink jy? Jou ma en pa? Ek kan die begraafplaas daaragter sien."

Harry voel 'n tinteling van iets wat meer is as opwinding, meer soos vrees. Noudat hy so naby is, wonder hy of hy dit op die ou end wel wil sien. Hermione weet miskien hoe hy voel, want sy vat sy hand en neem vir die eerste keer die leiding deur hom vorentoe te trek. Maar halfpad oor die plein steek sy skielik vas.

"Harry, kyk!"

Sy wys na die oorlogsgedenkteken. Soos hulle verby dit loop, transformeer dit. Pleks van 'n obelisk vol name is dit nou 'n standbeeld van drie mense: 'n man met onnet hare en 'n bril, 'n vrou met lang hare en 'n vriendelike, mooi gesig, en 'n babaseuntjie wat in sy ma sy arms sit. Op hulle koppe lê daar sneeu soos donsige wit pette.

Harry gaan nader terwyl hy na sy ouers se gesigte opstaar. Hy het nooit kon dink daar sal 'n standbeeld wees nie . . . Dit voel eienaardig om 'n beeld in klip van homself te sien, 'n gelukkige baba sonder 'n litteken op sy voorkop . . .

"Komaan," sê Harry toe hy genoeg gekyk het en hulle draai weer na die kerk toe. Toe hulle die straat oorsteek, loer hy oor sy skouer; die standbeeld het weer in die oorlogsgedenkteken verander.

Die gesing word harder soos hulle die kerk nader. Dit laat Harry se keel toetrek; dit herinner hom geweldig aan Hogwarts, aan Peeves wat vulgêre weergawes van Kersliedere vanuit die wapenrustings bulder, aan die Groot Saal se twaalf Kersbome, aan Dumbledore wat 'n hoedjie dra wat hy in 'n klapper gekry het, aan Ron in 'n handgebreide trui . . .

By die begraafplaas se ingang is daar 'n draaihek. Harry stoot dit so sag moontlik oop en hulle beweeg versigtig daardeur. Aan albei kante van die gladde voetpaadjie na die kerkdeure toe lê die sneeu diep en onaangeraak. Hulle beweeg deur die sneeu en kerf diep vore agter hulle terwyl hulle om die gebou loop, al met die skaduwees onder die helder vensters langs.

Agter die kerk staan ry op ry toegesneeude grafstene wat uitsteek bo 'n bleekblou kombers gespikkel met skitterende rooi, goud en groen op die plekke waar die gebrandskilderde glas se weerkaatsing op die sneeu val. Harry hou die towerstaf in sy baadjie stewig vas terwyl hulle na die naaste graf toe beweeg.

"Kyk hier, dis 'n Abbott, dalk langverlore familie van Hannah!"

"Praat sagter," waarsku Hermione.

Hulle loop verder en verder by die begraafplaas in, los diep spore in die sneeu agter hulle, buig vooroor om na die woorde op ou grafstene te tuur, en loer nou en dan skeeloog die duisternis om hulle in om doodseker te maak hulle is alleen.

"Harry, hier!"

Hermione is twee rye grafstene van hom af. Hy beweeg terug na haar terwyl sy hart wild in sy borskas klop.

"Is dit –?"

"Nee, maar kyk!"

Sy wys na die donker grafsteen. Harry buig vooroor en sien op die gevriesde graniet waarop daar plek-plek mos groei die woorde *Kendra Dumbledore* en, 'n entjie onder haar geboorte- en sterftedatums, *en haar dogter Ariana*. Daar is ook 'n aanhaling:

Waar jou skat is, sal jou hart ook wees.

So party van Rita Skeeter en Muriel se feite is reg. Die Dumbledore-gesin het inderdaad hier gewoon en van hulle is hier dood.

Dit is erger om die graf te sien as om daarvan te gehoor het. Harry kan nie help om te dink dat hy en Dumbledore albei diep verbintenisse met hierdie begraafplaas het nie en dat Dumbledore hom daarvan moes vertel het; nogtans het hy nooit daaraan gedink om dit met Harry te deel nie. Hulle kon die plek saam besoek het; Harry dink vir 'n oomblik hoe dit sou gevoel het om saam met Dumbledore hierheen te kom, oor die band wat daar sou wees en hoeveel dit vir hom sou beteken het. Maar Dumbledore het blykbaar gedink die feit dat hulle families langs mekaar in dieselfde begraafplaas lê, is 'n onbelangrike toevalligheid, miskien irrelevant vir die werk wat hy wou hê Harry moes doen.

Hermione kyk na Harry en hy is bly sy gesig is in die skaduwee weggesteek. Hy lees die woorde op die grafsteen weer. *Waar jou skat is, sal jou hart ook wees.* Hy verstaan nie wat daardie woorde beteken nie. Dumbledore moet dit ongetwyfeld gekies het, want ná sy ma se dood was hy die oudste lid van die gesin.

"Is jy seker hy't nooit iets genoem –?" begin Hermione.

"Nee," sê Harry kortaf, en dan: "Kom ons soek verder. Hy draai weg en wens hy het die grafsteen nie gesien nie: hy wil nie die opgewonde trillings wat deur hom gaan met wrewel besmet nie.

"Hier!" roep Hermione 'n paar oomblikke later weer vanuit die donker. "O nee, ekskuus! Ek dog hier staan Potter."

Sy vryf 'n verbrokkelende, mosbedekte steen en kyk met 'n effense frons op haar gesig daarna af.

"Harry, kom gou terug hier."

Hy wil sy aandag nie weer laat aflei nie en beweeg teësinnig deur die sneeu terug na haar toe.

"Wat?"

"Kyk hier!"

Die graf is baie oud en gehawend; Harry kan die naam skaars uitmaak. Hermione wys vir hom die simbool daaronder.

"Harry, dis die teken in die boek!"

Hy staar na die plek waarna sy wys: die steen is so verweer dat dit moeilik is om uit te maak wat daarop gegraveer is, al lyk dit soos 'n driehoekige teken onder die skaars leesbare naam.

"Ja . . . dit kan wees . . ."

Hermione lig haar towerstaf en wys daarmee na die naam op die grafsteen.

"Dit sê Ig – Ignotus, dink ek . . ."

"Ek gaan verder na my ouers soek, oukei?" sê Harry met 'n

effense skerpte in sy stem en hy beweeg weer weg en los haar hurkende langs die ou graf.

Elke nou en dan herken hy 'n van wat hy, soos Abbott, in Hogwarts teëgekom het. Soms word daar verskeie generasies van dieselfde towenaarfamilie in die begraafplaas verteenwoordig: Harry kan uit hulle datums aflei hulle het óf uitgesterf óf die huidige lede het uit Godric's Hollow weggetrek. Hy gaan al verder en verder tussen die grafte in en elke keer dat hy by 'n nuwe grafsteen kom, voel hy hoe pluk-pluk die onrus en afwagting aan hom.

Ewe skielik is dit asof die duisternis en stilte baie dieper word. Harry dink aan Dementors en kyk bekommerd om, maar besef dan die Kersliedere het opgehou en die kerkgangers se gebabbel en geskarrel is aan die wegdoof soos hulle terug na die plein toe beweeg. Iemand in die kerk het so pas die ligte afgeskakel.

Dan klink Hermione se stem vir die derde keer uit die duisternis op, skerp en duidelik, net 'n paar tree weg.

"Harry, hulle's hier . . . hier reg by my."

En haar stemtoon sê hierdie keer vir hom dit is sy ma en pa; hy gaan na haar toe en voel asof iets swaars op sy borskas druk, presies soos hy gevoel net nadat Dumbledore dood is, 'n hartseer wat fisiek op sy hart en longe druk.

Die grafsteen is net twee rye agter Kendra en Ariana s'n. Dit is van wit marmer gemaak, net soos Dumbledore se graftombe, en is maklik leesbaar, want dit skyn amper in die donker. Harry hoef nie te kniel of selfs tot baie naby te kom om die woorde wat daarop gegraveer is, te kan uitmaak nie.

James Potter, gebore 27 Maart 1960, oorlede 31 Oktober 1981
Lily Potter, gebore 30 Januarie 1960, oorlede 31 Oktober 1981

Die laaste vyand wat verslaan sal word, is die dood.

Harry lees die woorde stadig, asof hy net een kans gaan kry om die betekenis daarvan te snap, en hy lees die laaste sin hardop.

"'*Die laaste vyand wat verslaan sal word, is die dood*' . . ." 'n Aaklige gedagte kom by hom op, en daarmee saam 'n soort paniek. "Is dit nie 'n Doodseter-idee nie? Hoekom staan dit daar?"

"Dit beteken nie om die dood te verslaan op die manier wat die Doodseters dit bedoel nie, Harry," sê Hermione en haar stem is sag. "Dit beteken . . . weet jy . . . die dood is nie die einde nie. Daar's lewe ná die dood."

Maar hulle lewe nie, dink Harry: hulle is weg. Daardie leë woorde

kan nie die feit verbloem dat sy ouers se verrotte oorskot nog steeds onder die sneeu en klip lê nie, ongevoelig, onwetend. En die trane kom voor hy hulle kan keer; kokend warm en dan oombliklik bevrore op sy gesig, en wat help dit om hulle af te vee of te maak of hy nie huil nie? Hy laat die trane loop, sy lippe styf opmekaar vasgepers, en kyk af na die dik sneeu wat die plek wegsteek waar Lily en James se laaste oorskot lê, nou seker net beendere of stof, sonder om te weet of om te gee dat hulle lewende seun so naby is, met sy hart wat nog klop, lewend danksy hulle opoffering en op hierdie oomblik so naby daaraan om te wens hy slaap saam met hulle onder die sneeu.

Hermione vat sy hand weer en hou dit styf vas. Hy kan nie na haar kyk nie, maar druk haar hand terwyl hy skerp teue naglug inasem en probeer om te bedaar en weer beheer oor homself te kry. Hy moes iets gebring het om vir hulle te gee, maar hy het nie daaraan gedink nie, en al die plante in die begraafplaas is blaarloos en bevrore. Maar Hermione lig haar towerstaf, beweeg dit in 'n sirkel deur die lug en 'n krans van krismisrose blom voor hulle. Harry vang dit en lê dit op sy ouers se graf neer.

Toe hy opstaan, wil hy wegkom: hy dink nie hy kan nog een oomblik langer hier staan nie. Hy sit sy arm om Hermione se skouers en sy sit hare om sy middel en hulle draai in stilte om en loop weg deur die sneeu, verby Dumbledore se ma en suster, terug na die donker kerk en die draaihek wat nou uit die oog is.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



BATHILDA'S SECRET

Harry, stop."

"What's wrong?"

They had only just reached the grave of the unknown Abbott.

"There's someone there. Someone watching us. I can tell. There, over by the bushes."

They stood quite still, holding on to each other, gazing at the dense black boundary of the graveyard. Harry could not see anything.

"Are you sure?"

"I saw something move, I could have sworn I did. . . ."

She broke from him to free her wand arm.

"We look like Muggles," Harry pointed out.

"Muggles who've just been laying flowers on your parents' grave!

Harry, I'm sure there's someone over there!"

Harry thought of *A History of Magic*; the graveyard was supposed to be haunted: what if — ? But then he heard a rustle and saw a little eddy of dislodged snow in the bush to which Hermione had pointed. Ghosts could not move snow.

"It's a cat," said Harry, after a second or two, "or a bird. If it was a Death Eater we'd be dead by now. But let's get out of here, and we can put the Cloak back on."

They glanced back repeatedly as they made their way out of the graveyard. Harry, who did not feel as sanguine as he had pretended when reassuring Hermione, was glad to reach the gate and the slippery pavement. They pulled the Invisibility Cloak back over themselves. The pub was fuller than before: Many voices inside it were now singing the carol that they had heard as they approached the church. For a moment Harry considered suggesting they take refuge inside it, but before he could say anything Hermione murmured, "Let's go this way," and pulled him down the dark street leading out of the village in the opposite direction from which they had entered. Harry could make out the point where the cottages ended and the lane turned into open country again. They walked as quickly as they dared, past more windows sparkling with multicolored lights, the outlines of Christmas trees dark through the curtains.

"How are we going to find Bathilda's house?" asked Hermione, who was shivering a little and kept glancing back over her shoulder. "Harry? What do you think? Harry?"

She tugged at his arm, but Harry was not paying attention. He was looking toward the dark mass that stood at the very end of this row of

houses. Next moment he had sped up, dragging Hermione along with him; she slipped a little on the ice.

"Harry —"

"Look. . . . Look at it, Hermione. . . ."

"I don't . . . oh!"

He could see it; the Fidelius Charm must have died with James and Lily. The hedge had grown wild in the sixteen years since Hagrid had taken Harry from the rubble that lay scattered amongst the waist-high grass. Most of the cottage was still standing, though entirely covered in dark ivy and snow, but the right side of the top floor had been blown apart; that, Harry was sure, was where the curse had backfired. He and Hermione stood at the gate, gazing up at the wreck of what must once have been a cottage just like those that flanked it.

"I wonder why nobody's ever rebuilt it?" whispered Hermione.

"Maybe you can't rebuild it?" Harry replied. "Maybe it's like the injuries from Dark Magic and you can't repair the damage?"

He slipped a hand from beneath the Cloak and grasped the snowy and thickly rusted gate, not wishing to open it, but simply to hold some part of the house.

"You're not going to go inside? It looks unsafe, it might — oh, Harry, look!"

His touch on the gate seemed to have done it. A sign had risen out of the ground in front of them, up through the tangles of nettles and weeds, like some bizarre, fast-growing flower, and in golden letters upon the wood it said:

On this spot, on the night of 31 October 1981, Lily and James

Potter lost their lives. Their son, Harry, remains the only wizard ever to have survived the Killing Curse. This house, invisible to Muggles, has been left in its ruined state as a monument to the Potters and as a reminder of the violence that tore apart their family.

And all around these neatly lettered words, scribbles had been added by other witches and wizards who had come to see the place where the Boy Who Lived had escaped. Some had merely signed their names in Everlasting Ink; others had carved their initials into the wood, still others had left messages. The most recent of these, shining brightly over sixteen years' worth of magical graffiti, all said similar things.

Good luck, Harry, wherever you are. If you read this, Harry, we're all behind you!

Long live Harry Potter.

"They shouldn't have written on the sign!" said Hermione, indignant.

But Harry beamed at her.

"It's brilliant. I'm glad they did. I . . ."

He broke off. A heavily muffled figure was hobbling up the lane toward them, silhouetted by the bright lights in the distant square. Harry thought, though it was hard to judge, that the figure was a woman. She was moving slowly, possibly frightened of slipping on the snowy ground. Her stoop, her stoutness, her shuffling gait all gave an impression of extreme age. They watched in silence as she drew

nearer. Harry was waiting to see whether she would turn into any of the cottages she was passing, but he knew instinctively that she would not. At last she came to a halt a few yards from them and simply stood there in the middle of the frozen road, facing them.

He did not need Hermione's pinch to his arm. There was next to no chance that this woman was a Muggle: She was standing there gazing at a house that ought to have been completely invisible to her, if she was not a witch. Even assuming that she *was* a witch, however, it was odd behavior to come out on a night this cold, simply to look at an old ruin. By all the rules of normal magic, meanwhile, she ought not to be able to see Hermione and him at all. Nevertheless, Harry had the strangest feeling that she knew that they were there, and also who they were. Just as he had reached this uneasy conclusion, she raised a gloved hand and beckoned.

Hermione moved closer to him under the Cloak, her arm pressed against his.

"How does she know?"

He shook his head. The woman beckoned again, more vigorously. Harry could think of many reasons not to obey the summons, and yet his suspicions about her identity were growing stronger every moment that they stood facing each other in the deserted street.

Was it possible that she had been waiting for them all these long months? That Dumbledore had told her to wait, and that Harry would come in the end? Was it not likely that it was she who had moved in the shadows in the graveyard and had followed them to this spot? Even her ability to sense them suggested some Dumbledore-ish power that he had never encountered before.

Finally Harry spoke, causing Hermione to gasp and jump.

"Are you Bathilda?"

The muffled figure nodded and beckoned again.

Beneath the Cloak Harry and Hermione looked at each other. Harry raised his eyebrows; Hermione gave a tiny, nervous nod.

They stepped toward the woman and, at once, she turned and hobbled off back the way they had come. Leading them past several houses, she turned in at a gate. They followed her up the front path through a garden nearly as overgrown as the one they had just left. She fumbled for a moment with a key at the front door, then opened it and stepped back to let them pass.

She smelled bad, or perhaps it was her house: Harry wrinkled his nose as they sidled past her and pulled off the Cloak. Now that he was beside her, he realized how tiny she was; bowed down with age, she came barely level with his chest. She closed the door behind them, her knuckles blue and mottled against the peeling paint, then turned and peered into Harry's face. Her eyes were thick with cataracts and sunken into folds of transparent skin, and her whole face was dotted with broken veins and liver spots. He wondered whether she could make him out at all; even if she could, it was the balding Muggle whose identity he had stolen that she would see.

The odor of old age, of dust, of unwashed clothes and stale food intensified as she unwound a moth-eaten black shawl, revealing a head of scant white hair through which the scalp showed clearly.

"Bathilda?" Harry repeated.

She nodded again. Harry became aware of the locket against his skin; the thing inside it that sometimes ticked or beat had woken; he

could feel it pulsing through the cold gold. Did it know, could it sense, that the thing that would destroy it was near?

Bathilda shuffled past them, pushing Hermione aside as though she had not seen her, and vanished into what seemed to be a sitting room.

"Harry, I'm not sure about this," breathed Hermione.

"Look at the size of her; I think we could overpower her if we had to," said Harry. "Listen, I should have told you, I knew she wasn't all there. Muriel called her 'gaga.'"

"Come!" called Bathilda from the next room.

Hermione jumped and clutched Harry's arm.

"It's okay," said Harry reassuringly, and he led the way into the sitting room.

Bathilda was tottering around the place lighting candles, but it was still very dark, not to mention extremely dirty. Thick dust crunched beneath their feet, and Harry's nose detected, underneath the dank and mildewed smell, something worse, like meat gone bad. He wondered when was the last time anyone had been inside Bathilda's house to check whether she was coping. She seemed to have forgotten that she could do magic, too, for she lit the candles clumsily by hand, her trailing lace cuff in constant danger of catching fire.

"Let me do that," offered Harry, and he took the matches from her. She stood watching him as he finished lighting the candle stubs that stood on saucers around the room, perched precariously on stacks of books and on side tables crammed with cracked and moldy cups.

The last surface on which Harry spotted a candle was a bow-fronted chest of drawers on which there stood a large number of photographs. When the flame danced into life, its reflection wavered

on their dusty glass and silver. He saw a few tiny movements from the pictures. As Bathilda fumbled with logs for the fire, he muttered *"Tergeo"*: The dust vanished from the photographs, and he saw at once that half a dozen were missing from the largest and most ornate frames. He wondered whether Bathilda or somebody else had removed them. Then the sight of a photograph near the back of the collection caught his eye, and he snatched it up.

It was the golden-haired, merry-faced thief, the young man who had perched on Gregorovitch's windowsill, smiling lazily up at Harry out of the silver frame. And it came to Harry instantly where he had seen the boy before: in *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*, arm in arm with the teenage Dumbledore, and that must be where all the missing photographs were: in Rita's book.

"Mrs. — Miss — Bagshot?" he said, and his voice shook slightly. "Who is this?"

Bathilda was standing in the middle of the room watching Hermione light the fire for her.

"Miss Bagshot?" Harry repeated, and he advanced with the picture in his hands as the flames burst into life in the fireplace. Bathilda looked up at his voice, and the Horcrux beat faster upon his chest.

"Who is this person?" Harry asked her, pushing the picture forward.

She peered at it solemnly, then up at Harry.

"Do you know who this is?" he repeated in a much slower and louder voice than usual. "This man? Do you know him? What's he called?"

Bathilda merely looked vague. Harry felt an awful frustration.

How had Rita Skeeter unlocked Bathilda's memories?

"Who is this man?" he repeated loudly.

"Harry, what are you doing?" asked Hermione.

"This picture, Hermione, it's the thief, the thief who stole from Gregorovitch! Please!" he said to Bathilda. "Who is this?"

But she only stared at him.

"Why did you ask us to come with you, Mrs. — Miss — Bagshot?" asked Hermione, raising her own voice. "Was there something you wanted to tell us?"

Giving no sign that she had heard Hermione, Bathilda now shuffled a few steps closer to Harry. With a little jerk of her head she looked back into the hall.

"You want us to leave?" he asked.

She repeated the gesture, this time pointing firstly at him, then at herself, then at the ceiling.

"Oh, right . . . Hermione, I think she wants me to go upstairs with her."

"All right," said Hermione, "let's go."

But when Hermione moved, Bathilda shook her head with surprising vigor, once more pointing first at Harry, then to herself.

"She wants me to go with her, alone."

"Why?" asked Hermione, and her voice rang out sharp and clear in the candlelit room; the old lady shook her head a little at the loud noise.

"Maybe Dumbledore told her to give the sword to me, and only to me?"

"Do you really think she knows who you are?"

"Yes," said Harry, looking down into the milky eyes fixed upon his own, "I think she does."

"Well, okay then, but be quick, Harry."

"Lead the way," Harry told Bathilda.

She seemed to understand, because she shuffled around him toward the door. Harry glanced back at Hermione with a reassuring smile, but he was not sure she had seen it; she stood hugging herself in the midst of the candlelit squalor, looking toward the bookcase. As Harry walked out of the room, unseen by both Hermione and Bathilda, he slipped the silver-framed photograph of the unknown thief inside his jacket.

The stairs were steep and narrow: Harry was half tempted to place his hands on stout Bathilda's backside to ensure that she did not topple over backward on top of him, which seemed only too likely. Slowly, wheezing a little, she climbed to the upper landing, turned immediately right, and led him into a low-ceilinged bedroom.

It was pitch-black and smelled horrible: Harry had just made out a chamber pot protruding from under the bed before Bathilda closed the door and even that was swallowed by the darkness.

"Lumos," said Harry, and his wand ignited. He gave a start: Bathilda had moved close to him in those few seconds of darkness, and he had not heard her approach.

"You are Potter?" she whispered.

"Yes, I am."

She nodded slowly, solemnly. Harry felt the Horcrux beating fast, faster than his own heart: It was an unpleasant, agitating sensation.

"Have you got anything for me?" Harry asked, but she seemed distracted by his lit wand-tip.

"Have you got anything for me?" he repeated.

Then she closed her eyes and several things happened at once: Harry's scar prickled painfully; the Horcrux twitched so that the front of his sweater actually moved; the dark, fetid room dissolved momentarily. He felt a leap of joy and spoke in a high, cold voice: *Hold him!*

Harry swayed where he stood: The dark, foul-smelling room seemed to close around him again; he did not know what had just happened.

"Have you got anything for me?" he asked for a third time, much louder.

"Over here," she whispered, pointing to the corner. Harry raised his wand and saw the outline of a cluttered dressing table beneath the curtained window.

This time she did not lead him. Harry edged between her and the unmade bed, his wand raised. He did not want to look away from her.

"What is it?" he asked as he reached the dressing table, which was heaped high with what looked and smelled like dirty laundry.

"There," she said, pointing at the shapeless mass.

And in the instant that he looked away, his eyes raking the tangled mess for a sword hilt, a ruby, she moved weirdly: He saw it out of the corner of his eye; panic made him turn and horror paralyzed him as he saw the old body collapsing and the great snake pouring from the place where her neck had been.

The snake struck as he raised his wand: The force of the bite to his

forearm sent the wand spinning up toward the ceiling; its light swung dizzyingly around the room and was extinguished: Then a powerful blow from the tail to his midriff knocked the breath out of him: He fell backward onto the dressing table, into the mound of filthy clothing —

He rolled sideways, narrowly avoiding the snake's tail, which thrashed down upon the table where he had been a second earlier: Fragments of the glass surface rained upon him as he hit the floor. From below he heard Hermione call, "Harry?"

He could not get enough breath into his lungs to call back: Then a heavy smooth mass smashed him to the floor and he felt it slide over him, powerful, muscular —

"No!" he gasped, pinned to the floor.

"Yes," whispered the voice. *"Yesss . . . hold you . . . hold you . . ."*

"Accio . . . Accio Wand . . ."

But nothing happened and he needed his hands to try to force the snake from him as it coiled itself around his torso, squeezing the air from him, pressing the Horcrux hard into his chest, a circle of ice that throbbed with life, inches from his own frantic heart, and his brain was flooding with cold, white light, all thought obliterated, his own breath drowned, distant footsteps, everything going. . . .

A metal heart was banging outside his chest, and now he was flying, flying with triumph in his heart, without need of broomstick or thestral. . . .

He was abruptly awake in the sour-smelling darkness; Nagini had released him. He scrambled up and saw the snake outlined against

the landing light: It struck, and Hermione dived aside with a shriek; her deflected curse hit the curtained window, which shattered. Frozen air filled the room as Harry ducked to avoid another shower of broken glass and his foot slipped on a pencil-like something — his wand —

He bent and snatched it up, but now the room was full of the snake, its tail thrashing; Hermione was nowhere to be seen and for a moment Harry thought the worst, but then there was a loud bang and a flash of red light, and the snake flew into the air, smacking Harry hard in the face as it went, coil after heavy coil rising up to the ceiling. Harry raised his wand, but as he did so, his scar seared more painfully, more powerfully than it had done in years.

"He's coming! *Hermione, he's coming!*"

As he yelled the snake fell, hissing wildly. Everything was chaos: It smashed shelves from the wall, and splintered china flew everywhere as Harry jumped over the bed and seized the dark shape he knew to be Hermione —

She shrieked with pain as he pulled her back across the bed: The snake reared again, but Harry knew that worse than the snake was coming, was perhaps already at the gate, his head was going to split open with the pain from his scar —

The snake lunged as he took a running leap, dragging Hermione with him; as it struck, Hermione screamed, *"Confringo!"* and her spell flew around the room, exploding the wardrobe mirror and ricocheting back at them, bouncing from floor to ceiling; Harry felt the heat of it sear the back of his hand. Glass cut his cheek as, pulling Hermione with him, he leapt from bed to broken dressing table and

then straight out of the smashed window into nothingness, her scream reverberating through the night as they twisted in midair. . . .

And then his scar burst open and he was Voldemort and he was running across the fetid bedroom, his long white hands clutching at the windowsill as he glimpsed the bald man and the little woman twist and vanish, and he screamed with rage, a scream that mingled with the girl's, that echoed across the dark gardens over the church bells ringing in Christmas Day. . . .

And his scream was Harry's scream, his pain was Harry's pain . . . that it could happen here, where it had happened before . . . here, within sight of that house where he had come so close to knowing what it was to die . . . to die. . . . The pain was so terrible . . . ripped from his body. . . . But if he had no body, why did his head hurt so badly; if he was dead, how could he feel so unbearably, didn't pain cease with death, didn't it go . . .

The night wet and windy, two children dressed as pumpkins waddling across the square, and the shop windows covered in paper spiders, all the tawdry Muggle trappings of a world in which they did not believe . . . And he was gliding along, that sense of purpose and power and rightness in him that he always knew on these occasions. . . . Not anger . . . that was for weaker souls than he . . . but triumph, yes. . . . He had waited for this, he had hoped for it. . . .

"Nice costume, mister!"

He saw the small boy's smile falter as he ran near enough to see beneath the hood of the cloak, saw the fear cloud his painted face: Then the child turned and ran away . . . Beneath the robe he

fingered the handle of his wand . . . One simple movement and the child would never reach his mother . . . but unnecessary, quite unnecessary. . . .

And along a new and darker street he moved, and now his destination was in sight at last, the Fidelius Charm broken, though they did not know it yet. . . . And he made less noise than the dead leaves slithering along the pavement as he drew level with the dark hedge, and stared over it. . . .

They had not drawn the curtains; he saw them quite clearly in their little sitting room, the tall black-haired man in his glasses, making puffs of colored smoke erupt from his wand for the amusement of the small black-haired boy in his blue pajamas. The child was laughing and trying to catch the smoke, to grab it in his small fist. . . .

A door opened and the mother entered, saying words he could not hear, her long dark-red hair falling over her face. Now the father scooped up the son and handed him to the mother. He threw his wand down upon the sofa and stretched, yawning. . . .

The gate creaked a little as he pushed it open, but James Potter did not hear. His white hand pulled out the wand beneath his cloak and pointed it at the door, which burst open.

He was over the threshold as James came sprinting into the hall. It was easy, too easy, he had not even picked up his wand. . . .

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off!"

Hold him off, without a wand in his hand! . . . He laughed before casting the curse. . . .

"Avada Kedavra!"

The green light filled the cramped hallway, it lit the pram pushed against the wall, it made the banisters glare like lightning rods, and James Potter fell like a marionette whose strings were cut. . . .

He could hear her screaming from the upper floor, trapped, but as long as she was sensible, she, at least, had nothing to fear . . . He climbed the steps, listening with faint amusement to her attempts to barricade herself in. . . . She had no wand upon her either. . . . How stupid they were, and how trusting, thinking that their safety lay in friends, that weapons could be discarded even for moments. . . .

He forced the door open, cast aside the chair and boxes hastily piled against it with one lazy wave of his wand . . . and there she stood, the child in her arms. At the sight of him, she dropped her son into the crib behind her and threw her arms wide, as if this would help, as if in shielding him from sight she hoped to be chosen instead. . . .

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!"

"Stand aside, you silly girl . . . stand aside, now."

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead —"

"This is my last warning —"

"Not Harry! Please . . . have mercy . . . have mercy. . . . Not Harry! Not Harry! Please — I'll do anything —"

"Stand aside. Stand aside, girl!"

He could have forced her away from the crib, but it seemed more prudent to finish them all. . . .

The green light flashed around the room and she dropped like her husband. The child had not cried all this time: He could stand,

clutching the bars of his crib, and he looked up into the intruder's face with a kind of bright interest, perhaps thinking that it was his father who hid beneath the cloak, making more pretty lights, and his mother would pop up any moment, laughing —

He pointed the wand very carefully into the boy's face: He wanted to see it happen, the destruction of this one, inexplicable danger. The child began to cry: It had seen that he was not James. He did not like it crying, he had never been able to stomach the small ones whining in the orphanage —

"Avada Kedavra!"

And then he broke: He was nothing, nothing but pain and terror, and he must hide himself, not here in the rubble of the ruined house, where the child was trapped and screaming, but far away . . . far away. . . .

"No," he moaned.

The snake rustled on the filthy, cluttered floor, and he had killed the boy, and yet he was *the boy. . . .*

"No . . ."

And now he stood at the broken window of Bathilda's house, immersed in memories of his greatest loss, and at his feet the great snake slithered over broken china and glass . . . He looked down and saw something . . . something incredible. . . .

"No . . ."

"Harry, it's all right, you're all right!"

He stooped down and picked up the smashed photograph. There he was, the unknown thief, the thief he was seeking. . . .

"No . . . I dropped it. . . . I dropped it. . . ."

"Harry, it's okay, wake up, wake up!"

He was Harry. . . . Harry, not Voldemort . . . and the thing that was rustling was not a snake. . . . He opened his eyes.

"Harry," Hermione whispered. "Do you feel all — all right?"

"Yes," he lied.

He was in the tent, lying on one of the lower bunks beneath a heap of blankets. He could tell that it was almost dawn by the stillness and the quality of the cold, flat light beyond the canvas ceiling. He was drenched in sweat; he could feel it on the sheets and blankets.

"We got away."

"Yes," said Hermione. "I had to use a Hover Charm to get you into your bunk, I couldn't lift you. You've been . . . Well, you haven't been quite . . ."

There were purple shadows under her brown eyes and he noticed a small sponge in her hand: She had been wiping his face.

"You've been ill," she finished. "Quite ill."

"How long ago did we leave?"

"Hours ago. It's nearly morning."

"And I've been . . . what, unconscious?"

"Not exactly," said Hermione uncomfortably. "You've been shouting and moaning and . . . things," she added in a tone that made Harry feel uneasy. What had he done? Screamed curses like Voldemort, cried like the baby in the crib?

"I couldn't get the Horcrux off you," Hermione said, and he knew she wanted to change the subject. "It was stuck, stuck to your chest. You've got a mark; I'm sorry, I had to use a Severing Charm to get it away. The snake bit you too, but I've cleaned the wound and put

some dittany on it. . . .”

He pulled the sweaty T-shirt he was wearing away from himself and looked down. There was a scarlet oval over his heart where the locket had burned him. He could also see the half-healed puncture marks to his forearm.

“Where’ve you put the Horcrux?”

“In my bag. I think we should keep it off for a while.”

He lay back on his pillows and looked into her pinched gray face.

“We shouldn’t have gone to Godric’s Hollow. It’s my fault, it’s all my fault, Hermione, I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. I wanted to go too; I really thought Dumbledore might have left the sword there for you.”

“Yeah, well . . . we got that wrong, didn’t we?”

“What happened, Harry? What happened when she took you upstairs? Was the snake hiding somewhere? Did it just come out and kill her and attack you?”

“No,” he said. “*She* was the snake . . . or the snake was her . . . all along.”

“W-what?”

He closed his eyes. He could still smell Bathilda’s house on him: It made the whole thing horribly vivid.

“Bathilda must’ve been dead a while. The snake was . . . was inside her. You-Know-Who put it there in Godric’s Hollow, to wait. You were right. He knew I’d go back.”

“The snake was *inside* her?”

He opened his eyes again: Hermione looked revolted, nauseated.

"Lupin said there would be magic we'd never imagined," Harry said. "She didn't want to talk in front of you, because it was Parseltongue, all Parseltongue, and I didn't realize, but of course I could understand her. Once we were up in the room, the snake sent a message to You-Know-Who, I heard it happen inside my head, I felt him get excited, he said to keep me there . . . and then . . ."

He remembered the snake coming out of Bathilda's neck: Hermione did not need to know the details.

". . . she changed, changed into the snake, and attacked."

He looked down at the puncture marks.

"It wasn't supposed to kill me, just keep me there till You-Know-Who came."

If he had only managed to kill the snake, it would have been worth it, all of it . . . Sick at heart, he sat up and threw back the covers.

"Harry, no, I'm sure you ought to rest!"

"You're the one who needs sleep. No offense, but you look terrible. I'm fine. I'll keep watch for a while. Where's my wand?"

She did not answer, she merely looked at him.

"Where's my wand, Hermione?"

She was biting her lip, and tears swam in her eyes.

"Harry . . ."

"Where's my wand?"

She reached down beside the bed and held it out to him.

The holly and phoenix wand was nearly severed in two. One fragile strand of phoenix feather kept both pieces hanging together. The wood had splintered apart completely. Harry took it into his

hands as though it was a living thing that had suffered a terrible injury. He could not think properly: Everything was a blur of panic and fear. Then he held out the wand to Hermione.

"Mend it. Please."

"Harry, I don't think, when it's broken like this —"

"Please, Hermione, try!"

"R-Reparo."

The dangling half of the wand resealed itself. Harry held it up.

"Lumos!"

The wand sparked feebly, then went out. Harry pointed it at Hermione.

"Expelliarmus!"

Hermione's wand gave a little jerk, but did not leave her hand. The feeble attempt at magic was too much for Harry's wand, which split into two again. He stared at it, aghast, unable to take in what he was seeing . . . the wand that had survived so much . . .

"Harry," Hermione whispered so quietly he could hardly hear her. "I'm so, so sorry. I think it was me. As we were leaving, you know, the snake was coming for us, and so I cast a Blasting Curse, and it rebounded everywhere, and it must have — must have hit —"

"It was an accident," said Harry mechanically. He felt empty, stunned. "We'll — we'll find a way to repair it."

"Harry, I don't think we're going to be able to," said Hermione, the tears trickling down her face. "Remember . . . remember Ron? When he broke his wand, crashing the car? It was never the same again, he had to get a new one."

Harry thought of Ollivander, kidnapped and held hostage by

Voldemort; of Gregorovitch, who was dead. How was he supposed to find himself a new wand?

"Well," he said, in a falsely matter-of-fact voice, "well, I'll just borrow yours for now, then. While I keep watch."

Her face glazed with tears, Hermione handed over her wand, and he left her sitting beside his bed, desiring nothing more than to get away from her.

Bathilda se Geheim

"Harry, stop."

"Wat makeer?"

Hulle is nou by die onbekende Abbott se graf.

"Daar's iemand daar. Iemand hou ons dop. Daar oorkant by die struike."

Hulle staan doodstil en hou aan mekaar vas terwyl hulle na die digte, donker omheining van die begraafplaas staar. Harry kan niks sien nie.

"Is jy seker?"

"Ek het iets sien beweeg, ek kan sweer ek het . . ."

Sy los hom sodat sy die hand waarin sy haar towerstaf vashou, kan gebruik.

"Ons lyk soos Moggels," herinner hy haar.

"Moggels wat nou net blomme op jou ouers se graf gesit het! Harry, ek is seker daar's iemand daar!"

Harry dink aan *'n Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns*; dit is veronderstel om hier by die kerk te spook: wat as –? Maar dan hoor hy 'n geritsel en sien 'n klein stukkie warrelende sneeu wat losgekom het van die struik waarna Hermione gewys het. Spoke kan nie sneeu laat beweeg nie.

"Dis 'n kat," sê Harry ná 'n sekonde of twee, "of 'n voël. As dit 'n Doodseter was, was ons nou al dood. Maar kom ons gee pad hier, dan kan ons die Mantel weer oor ons gooi."

Hulle kyk herhaaldelik om soos hulle by die begraafplaas uitbeweeg. Harry voel nie so optimisties soos hy voorgegee het toe hy Hermione gerusgestel het nie en is bly toe hulle by die hek en die gladde sypaadjie kom. Hulle trek die Onsigbaarheidsmantel weer oor hulle. Die kroeg is voller as vroeër: baie stemme daarbinne sing nou die Kerslied wat hulle gehoor het toe hulle die kerk genader het. Harry wonder vir 'n oomblik of hy moet voorstel dat hulle daarbinne skuiling gaan soek, maar voor hy enigiets kan sê, prewel Hermione: "Kom ons gaan hierlangs," en trek hom

in by 'n donker straat wat by die dorp uitlei in die teenoorgestelde rigting as wat hulle ingekom het. Harry kan die plek sien waar die kothuise eindig en die laan by die oop veld langsaan indraai. Hulle loop so vinnig as wat hulle kan, verby nog vensters met skitterende, veelkleurige liggies, die buitelyne van Kersbome donker deur die gordyne.

"Hoe gaan ons Bathilda se huis kry?" vra Hermione wat effens bewe en aanhoudend oor haar skouer kyk. "Harry? Wat dink jy? Harry?"

Sy trek aan sy arm, maar Harry kom dit nie agter nie. Hy kyk na die donker ruïne wat reg aan die einde van hierdie ry huise staan. Die volgende oomblik begin hy vinniger loop en sleep Hermione, wat effens op die ys gly, saam met hom.

"Harry –"

"Kyk . . . kyk daar, Hermione . . ."

"Ek sien niks . . . O!"

Hy kan dit sien; die Fideliustowerspreuk moes saam met James en Lily gesterf het. Die heining het wild gegroei in die sestien jaar vandat Hagrid Harry uit die rommel wat in die gras tot by die middellyf gestrooi lê, kom haal het. Die grootste deel van die kothuis staan nog, hoewel dit heeltemal oortrek is met donker klimop en sneeu, maar die boonste verdieping se regterkant is uitmekaar geruk: Harry is seker dit is waar die vloek teruggeslaan het. Hy en Hermione staan by die hekkie en kyk op na die oorblyfsels van wat eens op 'n tyd 'n kothuis net soos die ander aan weerskante moet gewees het.

"Ek wonder hoekom het niemand dit ooit herbou nie?" fluister Hermione.

"Miskien kan jy dit nie herbou nie," antwoord Harry. "Miskien is dit soos 'n Donker Towerkuns-besering; jy kan die skade nie herstel nie."

Hy steek 'n hand onder die Mantel uit en vat aan die gaar geroeste hekkie vol sneeu, nie omdat hy dit wil oopmaak nie, maar net om te kan raak aan iets wat deel van die huis is.

"Jy gaan tog seker nie in nie? Dit lyk onveilig, dis dalk – o Harry, kyk!"

Skynbaar het sy aanraking aan die hek dit laat gebeur. 'n Kennisgewingbord rys uit die grond voor hulle op tussen die ineengerankte brandnetels en onkruid deur, soos die een of ander vreemde, vinnig groeiende blom, en op die hout staan daar in goue letters:

Op hierdie plek, op die aand van 31 Oktober 1981,
het Lily en James Potter die lewe gelaat.
Hul seun, Harry, bly die enigste towenaar ooit
wat die Moordvloek oorleef het.
Hierdie huis, onsigbaar vir Moggels, is gelaat
in sy verwoeste toestand as 'n monument aan die Potters
en ter herdenking aan die geweld
wat hulle gesin uitmekaar geskeur het.

En reg rondom hierdie woorde in netjiese letters het ander hekse en towenaars wat kom kyk het na die plek waar die Seun Wat Bly Leef Het ontsnap het, gekrabbel. Party het net hulle name in Onverganklike Ink geteken; ander het hulle voorletters in die hout gekerf en nog ander het boodskappe gelos. Die mees onlangse hiervan, wat helder bo-oor sestien jaar se towergraffiti uitskyn, sê almal soortgelyke dinge.

"Sterkte, Harry, waar jy ook al is." "As jy dit lees, Harry, ons staan almal agter jou!" "Lank lewe Harry Potter."

"Hulle moes nie op die kennisgewingbord geskryf het nie!" sê Hermione verontwaardig.

Maar Harry kyk stralend na haar.

"Dis fantasties. Ek is bly hulle het. Ek . . ."

Hy hou op praat. 'n Dik toegedraaide figuur loop mank in die straat op na hulle toe, afgeëts teen die plein se helder ligte in die verte. Dit is moeilik om te raai, maar Harry dink dit is 'n vrou se figuur. Sy beweeg stadig, waarskynlik bang dat sy op die ys sal gly. Haar krom houding, haar gesetheid, haar skuifelende manier van stap skep alles die indruk dat sy geweldig oud is. Hulle kyk in stilte hoe sy nader kom. Harry wag om te sien of sy by een van die kothuise waar sy verbyloop, gaan indraai, maar hy weet instinktief sy gaan nie. Sy kom uiteindelik 'n paar tree van hulle af tot stilstand en staan net daar in die middel van die bevrore straat en kyk in hulle rigting.

Dit was nie vir Hermione nodig om sy arm te knyp nie. Daar is so te sê geen kans dat hierdie vrou 'n Moggel is nie; sy staan daar en staar na 'n huis wat vir haar totaal onsigbaar behoort te wees as sy nie 'n heks is nie. Maar selfs al *is* sy 'n heks, is dit egter eienaardige gedrag om op 'n koue aand soos hierdie uit te kom net om na 'n ou bouval te kom kyk. Volgens al die reëls van normale towerkrag behoort sy hom en Hermione glad nie te kan sien nie. Maar Harry kry nogtans die vreemdste gevoel dat sy weet hulle is daar, en ook wie hulle is. Hy het skaars tot hierdie onrusbarende gevolgtrekking gekom of sy lig haar gehandskoende hand en wink.

Hermione beweeg nader aan hom onder die Mantel en haar arm druk teen syne.

"Hoe weet sy?"

Hy skud sy kop. Die vrou wink weer, meer energiek. Harry kan aan baie redes dink om nie daarop te reageer nie, maar nogtans word sy vermoedens oor haar identiteit elke sekonde wat hulle in die verlate straat teenoor mekaar staan sterker.

Is dit moontlik dat sy al soveel maande lank vir hulle wag? Dat Dumbledore vir haar gesê het om te wag, en dat Harry op die ou end sou kom? Was dit dalk sy wat in die begraafplaas se skaduwees beweeg het en hulle hierheen gevolg het? Selfs haar vermoë om hulle aan te voel, suggereer die een of ander Dumbledore-agtige mag wat hy nog nie voorheen teëgekom het nie.

Uiteindelik praat Harry, wat Hermione laat snak en wip.

"Is u Bathilda?"

Die toegewikkelde figuur knik en wink weer.

Onder die Mantel kyk Harry en Hermione na mekaar. Harry lig sy wenkbroue en Hermione gee 'n senuweeagtige knikkie.

Hulle gee 'n tree na die vrou toe; sy draai dadelik om en hinkepink terug in die rigting waaruit sy gekom het. Sy lei hulle verby 'n hele paar huise en gaan dan by 'n hekkie in. Hulle volg haar met 'n voetpaadjie langs wat byna net so toegegroei is soos die een wat hulle so pas agtergelaat het. Sy sukkel vir 'n oomblik met die voordeursleutel, maak die deur dan oop en staan terug sodat hulle kan ingaan.

Sy ruik sleg, of miskien is dit haar huis. Harry trek sy neus op 'n plooi toe hulle verby haar skuif en die Mantel afhaal. Noudat hy langs haar staan, besef hy hoe klein sy is; die ouderdom het haar so kromgetrek dat sy skaars tot by sy borskas kom. Sy maak die deur agter hulle toe, haar kneukels blou en gevlek teen die verf wat afdop, dan draai sy om en loer op na Harry se gesig. Haar oë is troebel van katarakte en versonke in voue deurskynende vel, en haar gesig is gespikkel met gebarste are en lewerkolle. Hy wonder of sy enigsins kan sien wie hy is; selfs al kan sy, sal dit die bles Moggel wees wie se identiteit hy gesteel het.

Die reuk van ouderdom, van stof, van ongewaste klere en ou kos word erger terwyl sy haarself losdraai uit 'n motgevrete swart tjalie en hulle sien 'n kop met yl wit hare waardeur haar kopvel duidelik wys.

"Bathilda?" herhaal Harry.

Sy knik weer. Harry word bewus van die hangertjie teen sy vel; die ding daarin wat soms tik of klop, het wakker geword; hy kan dit

deur die koue goud voel pols. Weet dit, kan dit aanvoel die ding wat dit gaan vernietig, is naby?

Bathilda skuifel verby hulle, stoot Hermione eenkant toe asof sy nie daar is nie en verdwyn na wat blykbaar 'n sitkamer is.

"Harry, ek is nie so seker hiervan nie," fluister Hermione.

"Kyk hoe klein is sy. Ek dink ons sal haar kan baasraak as ons moet," sê Harry. "Luister, ek moes jou gesê het, ek het geweet sy's nie lekker in haar kop nie. Muriel het haar 'heeltemal kens' genoem."

"Kom!" roep Bathilda uit die vertrek langsaan.

Hermione wip van die skrik en hou aan Harry se arm vas.

"Dis oukei," sê Harry gerusstellend en hy loop eerste by die sitkamer in.

Bathilda beweeg waggelend deur die vertrek en steek kerse aan, maar dit is nog steeds baie donker, om nie te praat van hoe vieslik vuil dit is nie. Dik stof knars onder hulle voete en onder die klam, muwwerige reuk bespeur Harry se neus iets ergers, iets soos vleis wat vrot geword het. Hy wonder wanneer was hier laas iemand in Bathilda se huis om seker te maak sy kom darem oor die weg. Dit lyk of sy boonop vergeet het sy kan toor, want sy steek die kerse lomp met haar hand aan en haar kantmoue wat slap raak elke keer amper aan die brand.

"Laat ek dit doen," bied Harry aan en hy vat die vuurhoutjies by haar. Sy hou hom dop terwyl hy die kersstompies klaar aansteek. Hulle staan op pierings oral in die vertrek, wankelrig gebalanseer op stapels boeke en op sytafeltjies vol gekraakte, gemufte koppies.

Die laaste oppervlak waarop Harry 'n kers bespeur, is 'n laaikas met 'n ronde voorkant waarop daar 'n groot klomp foto's staan. Toe die vlam lewendig brand, bewe sy weerkaatsing op die stowwerige glas en silwer. Harry sien 'n paar flou bewegings in die foto's. Terwyl Bathilda sukkelend 'n paar stompe in die kaggel gooi, prewel hy: "*Tergeo.*" Die stof verdwyn van die foto's af en hy sien dadelik 'n half-dosyn is weg uit die grootste en swierigste rame. Hy wonder of Bathilda of iemand anders dit uitgehaal het. Dan vang 'n foto naby die agterkant van die versameling sy oog en hy raap dit op.

Dit is die dief met die vrolike gesig en goue hare, die jong man wat op Gregorovitch se vensterbank gesit het; hy glimlag lui op na Harry uit die silwer raam. En dan onthou Harry skielik waar hy die seun al gesien het: in *Die Lewe en Leuens van Albus Dumbledore*, ingehaak by die tienderjarige Dumbledore, en nou weet hy waar al die vermiste foto's is: in Rita se boek.

"Mevrou – juffrou – Bagshot?" sê hy en sy stem bewe effens. "Wie is dit?"

Bathilda staan in die middel van die vertrek en kyk hoe Hermione die vuur vir haar aansteek.

"Juffrou Bagshot?" herhaal Harry en hy kom nader met die foto in sy hande terwyl die vuur in die kaggel opvlam. Bathilda kyk op toe sy hom hoor en die Horcrux op sy borskas klop vinniger.

"Wie is dit hierdie?" vra Harry vir haar en hou die foto uit.

Sy staar plegtig daarna, dan op na Harry.

"Weet u wie dit is?" herhaal hy in 'n baie stadiger en harder stem as gewoonlik. "Hierdie man? Ken u hom? Wat is sy naam?"

Bathilda lyk net vaag. Harry voel erg gefrustreerd. Hoe het Rita Skeeter Bathilda se herinneringe ontsluit?

"Wie is hierdie man?" herhaal hy hard.

"Harry, wat doen jy?" vra Hermione.

"Hierdie foto, Hermione, dis die dief, die dief wat Gregorovitch besteel het! Asseblief!" sê hy vir Bathilda. "Wie is dit?"

Maar sy staar hom net aan.

"Hoekom het u ons gevra om saam met u te kom, mevrou – juffrou – Bagshot?" vra Hermione wat ook harder praat. "Is daar iets wat u vir ons wil vertel?"

Sonder om 'n aanduiding te gee dat sy Hermione gehoor het, waggel Bathilda nou 'n paar tree nader aan Harry. Met 'n effense ruk van haar kop kyk sy terug na die voorportaal.

"Wil u hê ons moet loop?" vra hy.

Sy herhaal die beweging; hierdie keer wys sy eers na hom, dan na haarself, dan na die plafon.

"O, reg . . . Hermione, ek dink sy wil hê ek moet saam met haar boontoe gaan."

"Nou goed," sê Hermione, "kom ons gaan."

Maar toe Hermione beweeg, skud Bathilda haar kop verbasend energiek en wys weer eens eers na Harry en dan na haarself.

"Sy wil hê ek moet saam met haar gaan, alleen."

"Hoekom?" vra Hermione en haar stem klink skerp en helder in die kersverligte vertrek; die ou dame skud haar kop effens oor die harde geluid.

"Miskien het Dumbledore gesê sy moet die swaard vir my en my alleen gee?"

"Dink jy regtig sy weet wie jy is?"

"Ja," sê Harry en kyk af na die melkerige oë wat so vasgenael bly op syne, "ek dink sy weet."

"Wel, oukei dan, maar maak gou, Harry."

"Stap voor," sê Harry vir Bathilda.

Dit lyk of sy verstaan, want sy skuifel om hom na die deur toe.

Harry loer terug na Hermione en glimlag gerusstellend, maar hy is nie seker of sy dit gesien het nie; sy staan met haar arms om haar lyf vasgeklem in die middel van die kersverligte gemors en kyk na die boekrak. Toe Harry by die vertrek uitloop, laat glip hy die silwerraamfoto van die onbekende dief by sy baadjie in sonder dat Hermione of Bathilda dit sien.

Die trap is steil en nou: Harry is half in die versoeking om sy hande op die lywige Bathilda se agterstewe te sit om seker te maak sy tuimel nie agteroor op hom af nie, want dit lyk baie moontlik. Stadig en effens aamborstig klim sy tot by die boonste trapportaal, draai dan onmiddellik regs en lei hom by 'n slaapkamer met 'n lae plafon in.

Dit is pikdonker en dit ruik verskriklik: Harry sien skaars 'n kamerpot wat onder die bed uitsteek voor Bathilda die deur toemaak en selfs dit ook deur die donker ingesluk word.

"*Lumos,*" sê Harry en sy towerstaf vat vlam. Hy skrik: Bathilda het in daardie paar sekondes van duisternis tot naby aan hom gekom en hy het haar nie hoor aankom nie.

"Is jy Potter?" vra sy.

"Ja, ek is."

Sy knik stadig, plegtig. Harry voel hoe vinnig klop die Horcrux, vinniger as sy eie hart: dit is 'n onaangename, ontstellende sensasie.

"Het u iets vir my?" vra Harry, maar dit lyk of die punt van sy towerstaf haar aandag aflei.

"Het u iets vir my?" herhaal hy.

Dan maak sy haar oë toe en verskeie dinge gebeur gelyktydig: Harry se litteken prik pynlik; die Horcrux ruk so erg dat die voorkant van sy trui eintlik beweeg; die donker, stinkende kamer verdwyn vir 'n oomblik. Hy voel skielik uitgelate van blydskap en praat in 'n hoë, koue stem: *Hou hom vas!*

Harry wieg waar hy staan: dit is asof die donker, onwelriekende kamer hom weer omsluit; hy weet nie wat nou net gebeur het nie.

"Het u iets vir my?" vra hy 'n derde keer, baie harder.

"Daar," fluister sy en beduie na die hoek toe. Harry lig sy towerstaf en sien die buitelyne van 'n oorvol spieëltafel onder die venster met gordyne daarheen.

Hierdie keer lei sy hom nie soontoe nie. Harry druk tussen haar en die onopgemaakte bed deur met sy towerstaf gereed. Hy wil haar nie uit die oog verloor nie.

"Wat is dit?" vra hy toe hy by die spieëltafel kom wat hoog opgestapel is met goed wat soos vuil wasgoed lyk en ruik.

"Daar," sê sy en wys na die vormlose massa.

En die oomblik dat hy wegkyk en sy oë die deurmekaarspul begin fynkam vir 'n swaard se hef, maak sy 'n vreemde beweging: hy sien dit uit die hoek van sy oog; paniek laat hom omdraai en afgryse verlam hom toe hy sien hoe die ou liggaam inmekaarsak en die groot slang uitpeul by die plek waar haar nek was.

Die slang pik toe hy sy towerstaf lig: die geweld van die byt aan sy voorarm laat tol die towerstaf op na die plafon toe, sy lig swaai duiselingwekkend in die kamer rond en word geblus: dan tref die stert Harry met 'n harde hou in sy midderif en slaan sy asem weg: hy val agteroor op die spieëltafel, op die hoop vieslike klere –

Hy rol weg en ontwyk net-net die slang se stert wat neerslaan op die spieëltafel waar hy 'n sekonde gelede was: stukkies van die glasblad reën op hom neer toe hy die vloer tref. Hy hoor Hermione van onder af roep: "Harry?"

Hy kry nie genoeg asem in sy longe om terug te roep nie; dan moker 'n swaar, gladde massa hom teen die vloer vas en hy voel dit oor hom gly, sterk, gespierd –

"Nee!" snak hy, vasgepen op die vloer.

"Ja," fluister die stem. *"Ja . . . Hou jou vasss . . . Hou jou vasss . . ."*

"Accio . . . Accio towerstaf . . ."

Maar niks gebeur nie en hy het sy hande nodig om die slang van hom af te kry toe dit om sy bolyf begin krul en die lug uit hom pers en die Horcrux hard in sy borskas indruk, 'n sirkel van ys wat pols met lewe, duime van sy wanhopige hart af, en koue wit lig oorstroom sy brein, wis alle gedagtes uit, sy asem verdrink, veraf voetstappe, alles raak weg . . .

'n Metaalhart klop hard buitekant sy borskas, en nou vlieg hy, vlieg hy met triomf in sy hart, sonder dat hy 'n besemstok of Testral nodig het . . .

Hy word plotseling wakker in die duisternis wat so suur ruik; Nagini het hom laat los. Hy strompel orent en sien die slang se buitelyne teen die trapportaal se lig: sy pik en Hermione duik gillend opsy: haar vloek skram weg, tref die venster deur die gordyne en laat dit in stukkies spat. Ysige lug vul die kamer terwyl Harry wegduik om nog 'n stortvloed gebreekte glas te vermy en sy voet gly op iets wat soos 'n potlood voel – sy towerstaf –

Hy buk en raap dit op, maar nou is die kamer vol van die slang wat met haar stert slaan: Hermione is nêrens te sien nie, en vir 'n oomblik vrees Harry die ergste, maar dan is daar 'n harde slag en 'n rooi ligstraal en die slang vlieg in die lug op en klap Harry in die proses hard deur die gesig. Harry lig sy towerstaf, maar toe hy dit doen, brand sy litteken seerder en erger as in jare.

"Hy kom! *Hermione, hy kom!*"

Terwyl hy gil, val die slang wat wild sis. Daar is chaos: die slang slaan rakke van die muur af en skerwe porselein vlieg oral rond toe Harry oor die bed spring en na die donker vorm gryp wat hy weet Hermione is –

Sy skree van pyn toe hy haar terug oor die bed trek: die slang lig weer haar kop, maar Harry weet iets ergers as die slang kom nader, is miskien al by die hekkie; sy kop wil oopbars van die pyn in sy litteken –

Die slang skiet vorentoe en Harry spring en sleep Hermione saam met hom; toe die slang pik, skree Hermione: "*Confringo!*" en haar towerspreuk vlieg in die kamer rond, laat die hangkas se spieël ontplof, slaan terug na hulle en bons van die vloer af op plafon toe; Harry voel hoe skroei die hitte daarvan sy hand se agterkant. Glas sny sy wang toe hy, terwyl hy Hermione nog saam met hom sleep, van die bed na die verwoeste spieëltafel en dan reguit by die gebreekte venster uit die niet in spring; haar gil weergalm deur die nag terwyl hulle tussen hemel en aarde tol . . .

En dan bars sy litteken oop en hy is Voldemort en hy hardloop deur die stinkende slaapkamer en sy lang wit hande gryp na die vensterbank toe hy die bles man en die klein vroutjie sien tol en verdwyn en hy gil van woede, 'n gil wat vermeng met die meisie s'n, wat weerklink oor die donker tuine bo-oor die kerkklokke wat Kersdag inlui . . .

En sy gil is Harry se gil, sy pyn is Harry se pyn . . . dat dit hier kon gebeur het, hier waar dit voorheen gebeur het . . . hier by daardie huis waar hy so amper uitgevind het hoe dit is om dood te gaan . . . om dood te gaan . . . die pyn is so verskriklik . . . om uit sy lyf uit weggeskeur te word . . . maar as hy nie 'n lyf het nie, hoekom is sy kop dan so seer, as hy dood is, hoekom is dit so ondraaglik, hou pyn nie op wanneer jy doodgaan nie, gaan dit nie weg nie . . .

Die aand is nat en winderig. Twee kinders wat soos pampoene aangetrek is, waggel oor die plein, en die winkelvensters is vol papierspinnekoppe, al die smaaklose Moggeltooisels van 'n wêreld waaraan hulle nie glo nie . . . en hy sweef verder, met daardie gevoel van doelgerigtheid en mag en volmaaktheid wat hy altyd by hierdie geleenthede ervaar . . . nie woede nie . . . dit is vir swakker siele as hy . . . maar triomf, ja . . . Hy het hiervoor gewag, hy het hiervoor gehoop . . .

"Oulike kostuum, meneer!"

Hy sien die seuntjie se glimlag verstar toe hy naby genoeg kom om onder die mantel se kap in te sien, sien hoe die vrees sy geverfde gesig

vertroebel; dan draai die kind om en hardloop weg . . . hy voel onder die kleed met sy vingers aan sy towerstaf . . . een eenvoudige beweging en die kind sal nooit by sy ma uitkom nie . . . maar dis onnodig, totaal onnodig . . .

En hy beweeg met 'n nuwe, donkerder straat langs en nou is sy bestemming uiteindelik in sig, die Fideliustowerspreuk verbreek, al weet hulle dit nog nie . . . en hy maak minder geraas as die dooie blare wat slingerend met die sypaadjie langs dwarrel toe hy by die donker heining kom en daaroor staar . . .

Hulle gordyne is oop; hy sien hulle duidelik in hulle klein sitkamertjie: die lang swartkop man met sy bril, wat borrels gekleurde rook by sy towerstaf laat uitkom om die klein swartkop seuntjie in sy blou pajamas te vermaak. Die kind lag en probeer die rook vang, dit in sy vuisie vasgryp . . .

'n Deur gaan oop en die ma kom in en sê woorde wat hy nie kan hoor nie; haar lang donkerrooi hare val oor haar gesig. Nou gryp die pa die seun en gee hom vir die ma. Hy gooi sy towerstaf op die rusbank neer en rek hom gapend uit . . .

Die hekkie piep effens toe hy dit oopstoot, maar James Potter hoor dit nie. Sy wit hand haal die towerstaf onder sy mantel uit en rig dit op die deur wat oopbars.

Hy is al oor die drumpel toe James by die portaal ingehardloop kom. Dit is maklik, te maklik, hy het nie eens sy towerstaf opgetel nie . . .

"Lily, vat vir Harry en gee pad! Dis hy! Gee pad! Hardloop! Ek sal hom weghou –"

Hom weghou, sonder 'n towerstaf in sy hand! . . . Hy lag voor hy die vloek afvuur . . .

"Avada Kedavra!"

Die groen lig vul die beknopte portaal, dit steek die stootwaentjie teen die muur aan die brand, dit laat die traprelings soos weerligafleiers gloei en James Potter val soos 'n marionet waarvan die toue afgeknip is . . .

Hy kan haar op die boonste verdieping hoor gil. Sy is vasgekeer, maar solank sy verstandig is, het sy niks om te vrees nie, nie sy nie . . . Hy beweeg met die trap op en hoor effens geamuseerd hoe sy probeer om haarself te verskans . . . Sy het ook nie 'n towerstaf by haar nie . . . Hoe dom is hulle, en hoe goedgelowig, om te dink vriendskap waarborg veiligheid, dat jy jou wapen selfs vir 'n paar oomblikke kan neersit . . .

Hy forseer die deur oop, smyt die stoel en bokse wat inderhaas daarteen opgestapel is met een lui swaai van sy towerstaf eenkant toe . . . en daar staan sy met die kind in haar arms. Toe sy hom sien, laat val sy haar seun in die kinderbedjie agter haar en gooi haar arms wyd oop

asof dit sal help, asof sy hoop as sy hom wegsteek, sal sy in sy plek gekies word . . .

"Nie Harry nie, nie Harry nie, asseblief nie Harry nie!"

"Staan opsy, jou simpel meisiekind . . . Staan opsy – nou . . ."

"Nie Harry nie, asseblief nie, vat my, maak my eerder dood –"

"Dit is my laaste waarskuwing –"

"Nie Harry nie! Asseblief . . . wees hom genadig . . . wees hom genadig . . . Nie Harry nie! Nie Harry nie! Asseblief – ek sal enigiets doen –"

"Staan opsy – staan opsy, meisiekind –"

Hy kan haar van die kinderbedjie af wegdwing, maar dit voel verstandiger om met hulle albei klaar te speel . . .

Die groen lig flits deur die vertrek en sy val net soos haar man. Die kind het die hele tyd nie gehuil nie: hy kan staan; hy hou aan sy kinderbedjie se reling vas en kyk op na die indringer se gesig met 'n soort wakker belangstelling, miskien met die idee dat dit sy pa is wat onder die mantel wegkruip, en nog vrolike liggies maak en dat sy ma enige oomblik sal opstaan en lag –

Hy rig die towerstaf baie versigtig op die seun se gesig: hy wil dit sien gebeur, die vernietiging van hierdie een onverklaarbare gevaar. Die kind begin huil: die kleintjie het gesien hy is nie James nie. Hy hou nie van 'n gehuil nie, hy kon die kleintjies se gekerm in die weeshuis nooit verdra nie –

"Avada Kedavra!"

En toe breek hy: hy is niks nie, niks behalwe pyn en vrees nie, en hy moet gaan wegkruip, nie hier in hierdie verwoeste huis se puin waar die vasgekeerde kind skree nie, maar ver weg . . . ver weg . . .

"Nee," kreun hy.

Die slang ritsel oor die warboel op die vuil vloer. Hy het die seun doodgemaak, maar nogtans is hy die seun . . .

"Nee . . ."

En nou staan hy by die gebreekte venster in Bathilda se huis, gedompel in herinneringe aan sy grootste nederlaag en by sy voete seil die groot slang slingerend oor gebreekte porselein en glas . . . Hy kyk af en sien iets . . . iets ongelooflik . . .

"Nee . . ."

"Harry, dis oukei, jy's oukei!"

Hy buig vooroor en tel die gebreekte fotoraam op. Daar is hy, die onbekende dief, die dief na wie hy soek . . .

"Nee . . . ek het dit laat val . . . ek het dit laat val . . ."

"Harry, dis oukei, word wakker, word wakker!"

Hy is Harry . . . Harry, nie Voldemort nie . . . en die ding wat so ritsel, is nie 'n slang nie . . .

Hy maak sy oë oop.

"Harry," fluister Hermione. "Voel jy ou – oukei?"
"Ja," jok hy.
Hy is in die tent; hy lê op een van die onderste slaapbanke onder 'n hoop komberse. Die stilte en koue, flou lig onder die seilplafon sê vir hom dit is amper dagbreek. Hy is deurdrenk van sweet; hy voel dit op die lakens en komberse.
"Ons het weggekom."
"Ja," sê Hermione. "Ek moes 'n Sweefspreuk gebruik om jou op jou slaapbank te kry; ek kon jou nie oplig nie. Jy was . . . wel, jy was nie juis . . ."
Daar is pers skaduwees onder haar bruin oë en hy sien 'n klein sponsie in haar hand: sy het sy gesig daarmee afgevee.
"Jy was siek," maak sy klaar. "Baie siek."
"Hoe lank terug is ons daar weg?"
"Ure gelede. Dis amper oggend."
"En ek was . . . wat, bewusteloos?"
"Nie eintlik nie," sê Hermione ongemaklik. "Jy't geskree en gekreun en ... so aan," voeg sy by in 'n stemtoon wat Harry onrustig maak. Wat het hy gedoen? Vloeke uitgegil soos Voldemort; soos die baba in die kinderbedjie gehuil?
"Ek kon die Horcrux nie van jou afkry nie," sê Hermione en hy weet sy wil die onderwerp verander. "Dit het vasgesit, vas aan jou borskas. Jy't 'n litteken; ek's jammer, ek moes 'n Verwyderingstowerspreuk gebruik om dit af te kry. Die slang het jou ook gepik, maar ek het die wond skoongemaak en 'n bietjie essekruid daarop gesit . . ."
Hy lig die sweterige T-hemp wat hy aanhet op en kyk af. Daar is 'n skarlakenrooi ovaal oor sy hart waar die hangertjie hom gebrand het. Hy sien ook die gedeeltelik geneesde pikmerke op sy voorarm.
"Waar het jy die Horcrux gesit?"
"In my handsak. Ek dink ons moet dit vir 'n ruk nie dra nie."
Hy lê terug teen sy kussings en kyk na haar vermoeide grys gesig.
"Ons moes nie Godric's Hollow toe gegaan het nie. Dis my skuld, dis alles my skuld, Hermione, ek's jammer."
"Dis nie jou skuld nie. Ek wou ook soontoe gaan; ek het regtig gedink Dumbledore het die swaard dalk daar vir jou gelos."
"Ja, wel . . . ons was verkeerd, of hoe?"
"Wat het gebeur, Harry? Wat het gebeur toe sy jou boontoe vat? Het die slang iewers weggekruip? Het sy net uitgekom en haar doodgemaak en jou aangeval?"
"Nee," sê hy. "Sy was die slang . . . of die slang was sy . . . die hele tyd."

"W – wat?"

Hy maak sy oë toe. Hy kan Bathilda se huis nog aan hom ruik: dit maak die hele ding afgryslik werklik.

"Bathilda moet al 'n hele ruk dood wees. Die slang was . . . was binne-in haar. Jy-Weet-Wie het hom daar na Godric's Hollow toe gestuur, om te wag. Jy was reg. Hy't geweet ek sal teruggaan."

"Die slang was *binne-in* haar?"

Hy maak sy oë weer oop: Hermione lyk of sy wil naar word van walging.

"Lupin het gesê daar sal towerkrag wees wat ons ons nooit kon voorstel nie," sê Harry. "Sy wou nie voor jou praat nie, want dit was Parseltaal, alles Parseltaal, en ek het dit nie besef nie, maar ek kon haar natuurlik verstaan. Toe ons eers bo in die kamer was, het die slang vir Jy-Weet-Wie 'n boodskap gestuur. Ek het dit in my kop hoor gebeur, ek het gevoel hy raak opgewonde en sê die slang moet my daar hou . . . en toe . . ."

Hy onthou hoe die slang uit Bathilda se nek gekom het: Hermione hoef nie die detail te weet nie.

". . . toe het sy verander, in die slang verander en my aangeval."

Hy kyk af na die pikmerke.

"Dit was nie veronderstel om my dood te maak nie, net om my daar te hou tot Jy-Weet-Wie kom."

As hy die slang net kon doodgemaak het, sou dit die moeite werd gewees het, dan sou alles die moeite werd gewees het . . . Hy sit mistroostig regop en gooi die beddegoed van hom af.

"Harry, nee, jy moet rus!"

"Jy's die een wat slaap nodig het. Ek bedoel dit nie lelik nie, maar jy lyk vreeslik. Ek's oukei. Ek sal 'n ruk wag staan. Waar's my towerstaf?"

Sy antwoord nie; sy kyk net na hom.

"Waar's my towerstaf, Hermione?"

Sy byt haar lip en trane swem in haar oë.

"Harry . . ."

"Waar's my towerstaf?"

Sy reik af langs die bed en hou dit na hom toe uit.

Die steekpalm-en-feniks-towerstaf is amper middeldeur gebreek. Een broos draadjie van die feniksveer hou die twee stukke aanmekaar. Die hout het heeltemal versplinter. Harry neem dit in sy hande asof dit iets lewendigs is wat ernstig beseer is. Hy kan nie helder dink nie: alles is 'n waas van paniek en vrees. Dan hou hy die towerstaf na Hermione toe uit.

"Maak dit reg. Asseblief."

"Harry, ek dink nie as dit so erg gebreek is –"

"Asseblief, Hermione, probeer!"

"*R – Reparo.*"

Die deel van die towerstaf wat los hang, herseël vanself. Harry lig dit op.

"*Lumos!*"

Die towerstaf gee flou vonke af en gaan dan dood. Harry wys daarmee na Hermione.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Hermione se towerstaf ruk effens, maar bly in haar hand. Hierdie flou poging tot towerkrag was te veel vir Harry se towerstaf en dit breek weer in twee. Hy staar daarna, vervul met afgryse; hy kan nie verwerk wat hy sien nie . . . die towerstaf wat soveel oorleef het . . .

"Harry," fluister Hermione so sag dat hy haar skaars kan hoor. "Ek is so, so jammer. Ek dink dit was ek. Toe ons daar padgee, weet jy, het die slang op ons afgepyl en toe vuur ek 'n Plofvloek af, en dit het oral teruggebons en dit moes jou towerstaf – getref het –"

"Dit was 'n ongeluk," sê Harry meganies. Hy voel leeg, bedwelmd. "Ons – ons sal 'n manier kry om dit reg te maak."

"Harry, ek dink nie ons gaan dit kan doen nie," sê Hermione en daar loop trane by haar wange af. "Onthou . . . onthou jy wat met Ron gebeur het? Toe hy sy towerstaf gebreek het, met die kar se ongeluk? Dit was nooit weer dieselfde nie; hy moes 'n nuwe een kry."

Harry dink aan Ollivander, wat Voldemort ontvoer het en gyselaar hou, en aan Gregorovitch wat dood is. Waar gaan hy vir hom 'n nuwe towerstaf kry?

"Wel," sê hy in 'n kastig saaklike stemtoon, "wel, dan sal ek vir eers maar solank joune moet leen. Terwyl ek wagstaan."

Haar gesig blink van die trane. Hermione gee vir hom haar towerstaf en hy los haar waar sy langs sy bed sit, want hy wil nou net van haar af wegkom.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



THE LIFE AND LIES OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

The sun was coming up: The pure, colorless vastness of the sky stretched over him, indifferent to him and his suffering. Harry sat down in the tent entrance and took a deep breath of clean air. Simply to be alive to watch the sun rise over the sparkling snowy hillside ought to have been the greatest treasure on earth, yet he could not appreciate it: His senses had been spiked by the calamity of losing his wand. He looked out over a valley blanketed in snow, distant church bells chiming through the glittering silence.

Without realizing it, he was digging his fingers into his arms as if he were trying to resist physical pain. He had spilled his own blood

more times than he could count; he had lost all the bones in his right arm once; this journey had already given him scars to his chest and forearm to join those on his hand and forehead, but never, until this moment, had he felt himself to be fatally weakened, vulnerable, and naked, as though the best part of his magical power had been torn from him. He knew exactly what Hermione would say if he expressed any of this: The wand is only as good as the wizard. But she was wrong, his case was different. She had not felt the wand spin like the needle of a compass and shoot golden flames at his enemy. He had lost the protection of the twin cores, and only now that it was gone did he realize how much he had been counting upon it.

He pulled the pieces of the broken wand out of his pocket and, without looking at them, tucked them away in Hagrid's pouch around his neck. The pouch was now too full of broken and useless objects to take any more. Harry's hand brushed the old Snitch through the mokeskin and for a moment he had to fight the temptation to pull it out and throw it away. Impenetrable, unhelpful, useless, like everything else Dumbledore had left behind —

And his fury at Dumbledore broke over him now like lava, scorching him inside, wiping out every other feeling. Out of sheer desperation they had talked themselves into believing that Godric's Hollow held answers, convinced themselves that they were supposed to go back, that it was all part of some secret path laid out for them by Dumbledore; but there was no map, no plan. Dumbledore had left them to grope in the darkness, to wrestle with unknown and undreamed-of terrors, alone and unaided: Nothing was explained, nothing was given freely, they had no sword, and now, Harry had no

wand. And he had dropped the photograph of the thief, and it would surely be easy now for Voldemort to find out who he was. . . . Voldemort had all the information now. . . .

"Harry?"

Hermione looked frightened that he might curse her with her own wand. Her face streaked with tears, she crouched down beside him, two cups of tea trembling in her hands and something bulky under her arm.

"Thanks," he said, taking one of the cups.

"Do you mind if I talk to you?"

"No," he said because he did not want to hurt her feelings.

"Harry, you wanted to know who that man in the picture was. Well . . . I've got the book."

Timidly she pushed it onto his lap, a pristine copy of *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*.

"Where — how — ?"

"It was in Bathilda's sitting room, just lying there. . . . This note was sticking out of the top of it."

Hermione read the few lines of spiky, acid-green writing aloud.

"'*Dear Batty, Thanks for your help. Here's a copy of the book, hope you like it. You said everything, even if you don't remember it. Rita.*' I think it must have arrived while the real Bathilda was alive, but perhaps she wasn't in any fit state to read it?"

"No, she probably wasn't."

Harry looked down upon Dumbledore's face and experienced a surge of savage pleasure: Now he would know all the things that Dumbledore had never thought it worth telling him, whether

Dumbledore wanted him to or not.

"You're still really angry at me, aren't you?" said Hermione; he looked up to see fresh tears leaking out of her eyes, and knew that his anger must have shown in his face.

"No," he said quietly. "No, Hermione, I know it was an accident. You were trying to get us out of there alive, and you were incredible. I'd be dead if you hadn't been there to help me."

He tried to return her watery smile, then turned his attention to the book. Its spine was stiff; it had clearly never been opened before. He riffled through the pages, looking for photographs. He came across the one he sought almost at once, the young Dumbledore and his handsome companion, roaring with laughter at some long-forgotten joke. Harry dropped his eyes to the caption.

Albus Dumbledore, shortly after his mother's death, with his friend Gellert Grindelwald.

Harry gaped at the last word for several long moments. Grindelwald. His friend Grindelwald. He looked sideways at Hermione, who was still contemplating the name as though she could not believe her eyes. Slowly she looked up at Harry.

"Grindelwald?"

Ignoring the remainder of the photographs, Harry searched the pages around them for a recurrence of that fatal name. He soon discovered it and read greedily, but became lost: It was necessary to go further back to make sense of it all, and eventually he found himself at the start of a chapter entitled "The Greater Good." Together, he and Hermione started to read:

Now approaching his eighteenth birthday, Dumbledore left Hogwarts in a blaze of glory — Head Boy, Prefect, Winner of the Barnabus Finkley Prize for Exceptional Spell-Casting, British Youth Representative to the Wizengamot, Gold Medal-Winner for Ground-Breaking Contribution to the International Alchemical Conference in Cairo. Dumbledore intended, next, to take a Grand Tour with Elphias "Dogbreath" Doge, the dim-witted but devoted sidekick he had picked up at school.

The two young men were staying at the Leaky Cauldron in London, preparing to depart for Greece the following morning, when an owl arrived bearing news of Dumbledore's mother's death. "Dogbreath" Doge, who refused to be interviewed for this book, has given the public his own sentimental version of what happened next. He represents Kendra's death as a tragic blow, and Dumbledore's decision to give up his expedition as an act of noble self-sacrifice.

Certainly Dumbledore returned to Godric's Hollow at once, supposedly to "care" for his younger brother and sister. But how much care did he actually give them?

"He were a head case, that Aberforth," says Enid Smeek, whose family lived on the outskirts of Godric's Hollow at that time. "Ran wild. 'Course, with his mum and dad gone you'd have felt sorry for him, only he kept chucking goat dung at my head. I don't think Albus was fussed about him, I never saw them together, anyway."

So what was Albus doing, if not comforting his wild young brother? The answer, it seems, is ensuring the continued

imprisonment of his sister. For, though her first jailer had died, there was no change in the pitiful condition of Ariana Dumbledore. Her very existence continued to be known only to those few outsiders who, like “Dogbreath” Doge, could be counted upon to believe in the story of her “ill health.”

Another such easily satisfied friend of the family was Bathilda Bagshot, the celebrated magical historian who has lived in Godric’s Hollow for many years. Kendra, of course, had rebuffed Bathilda when she first attempted to welcome the family to the village. Several years later, however, the author sent an owl to Albus at Hogwarts, having been favorably impressed by his paper on trans-species transformation in *Transfiguration Today*. This initial contact led to acquaintance with the entire Dumbledore family. At the time of Kendra’s death, Bathilda was the only person in Godric’s Hollow who was on speaking terms with Dumbledore’s mother.

Unfortunately, the brilliance that Bathilda exhibited earlier in her life has now dimmed. “The fire’s lit, but the cauldron’s empty,” as Ivor Dillonsby put it to me, or, in Enid Smeek’s slightly earthier phrase, “She’s nutty as squirrel poo.” Nevertheless, a combination of tried-and-tested reporting techniques enabled me to extract enough nuggets of hard fact to string together the whole scandalous story.

Like the rest of the Wizarding world, Bathilda puts Kendra’s premature death down to a backfiring charm, a story repeated by Albus and Aberforth in later years. Bathilda also parrots the family line on Ariana, calling her “frail” and “delicate.” On one

subject, however, Bathilda is well worth the effort I put into procuring Veritaserum, for she, and she alone, knows the full story of the best-kept secret of Albus Dumbledore's life. Now revealed for the first time, it calls into question everything that his admirers believed of Dumbledore: his supposed hatred of the Dark Arts, his opposition to the oppression of Muggles, even his devotion to his own family.

The very same summer that Dumbledore went home to Godric's Hollow, now an orphan and head of the family, Bathilda Bagshot agreed to accept into her home her great-nephew, Gellert Grindelwald.

The name of Grindelwald is justly famous: In a list of Most Dangerous Dark Wizards of All Time, he would miss out on the top spot only because You-Know-Who arrived, a generation later, to steal his crown. As Grindelwald never extended his campaign of terror to Britain, however, the details of his rise to power are not widely known here.

Educated at Durmstrang, a school famous even then for its unfortunate tolerance of the Dark Arts, Grindelwald showed himself quite as precociously brilliant as Dumbledore. Rather than channel his abilities into the attainment of awards and prizes, however, Gellert Grindelwald devoted himself to other pursuits. At sixteen years old, even Durmstrang felt it could no longer turn a blind eye to the twisted experiments of Gellert Grindelwald, and he was expelled.

Hitherto, all that has been known of Grindelwald's next movements is that he "traveled abroad for some months." It can

now be revealed that Grindelwald chose to visit his great-aunt in Godric's Hollow, and that there, intensely shocking though it will be for many to hear it, he struck up a close friendship with none other than Albus Dumbledore.

"He seemed a charming boy to me," babbles Bathilda, "whatever he became later. Naturally I introduced him to poor Albus, who was missing the company of lads his own age. The boys took to each other at once."

They certainly did. Bathilda shows me a letter, kept by her, that Albus Dumbledore sent Gellert Grindelwald in the dead of night.

"Yes, even after they'd spent all day in discussion — both such brilliant young boys, they got on like a cauldron on fire — I'd sometimes hear an owl tapping at Gellert's bedroom window, delivering a letter from Albus! An idea would have struck him, and he had to let Gellert know immediately!"

And what ideas they were. Profoundly shocking though Albus Dumbledore's fans will find it, here are the thoughts of their seventeen-year-old hero, as relayed to his new best friend. (A copy of the original letter may be seen on page 463.)

Gellert —

Your point about Wizard dominance being FOR THE MUGGLES' OWN GOOD *— this, I think, is the crucial point. Yes, we have been given power and yes, that power gives us the right to rule, but it also gives us responsibilities over the ruled. We must stress this point, it will be the*

foundation stone upon which we build. Where we are opposed, as we surely will be, this must be the basis of all our counterarguments. We seize control FOR THE GREATER GOOD. *And from this it follows that where we meet resistance, we must use only the force that is necessary and no more. (This was your mistake at Durmstrang! But I do not complain, because if you had not been expelled, we would never have met.)*

Albus

Astonished and appalled though his many admirers will be, this letter constitutes proof that Albus Dumbledore once dreamed of overthrowing the Statute of Secrecy and establishing Wizard rule over Muggles. What a blow for those who have always portrayed Dumbledore as the Muggle-borns' greatest champion! How hollow those speeches promoting Muggle rights seem in the light of this damning new evidence! How despicable does Albus Dumbledore appear, busy plotting his rise to power when he should have been mourning his mother and caring for his sister!

No doubt those determined to keep Dumbledore on his crumbling pedestal will bleat that he did not, after all, put his plans into action, that he must have suffered a change of heart, that he came to his senses. However, the truth seems altogether more shocking.

Barely two months into their great new friendship, Dumbledore and Grindelwald parted, never to see each other

again until they met for their legendary duel (for more, see chapter 22). What caused this abrupt rupture? *Had* Dumbledore come to his senses? Had he told Grindelwald he wanted no more part in his plans? Alas, no.

"It was poor little Ariana dying, I think, that did it," says Bathilda. "It came as an awful shock. Gellert was there in the house when it happened, and he came back to my house all of a dither, told me he wanted to go home the next day. Terribly distressed, you know. So I arranged a Portkey and that was the last I saw of him.

"Albus was beside himself at Ariana's death. It was so dreadful for those two brothers. They had lost everybody except each other. No wonder tempers ran a little high. Aberforth blamed Albus, you know, as people will under these dreadful circumstances. But Aberforth always talked a little madly, poor boy. All the same, breaking Albus's nose at the funeral was not decent. It would have destroyed Kendra to see her sons fighting like that, across her daughter's body. A shame Gellert could not have stayed for the funeral. . . . He would have been a comfort to Albus, at least. . . ."

This dreadful coffin-side brawl, known only to those few who attended Ariana Dumbledore's funeral, raises several questions. Why exactly did Aberforth Dumbledore blame Albus for his sister's death? Was it, as "Batty" pretends, a mere effusion of grief? Or could there have been some more concrete reason for his fury? Grindelwald, expelled from Durmstrang for near-fatal attacks upon fellow students, fled the country hours

after the girl's death, and Albus (out of shame or fear?) never saw him again, not until forced to do so by the pleas of the Wizarding world.

Neither Dumbledore nor Grindelwald ever seems to have referred to this brief boyhood friendship in later life. However, there can be no doubt that Dumbledore delayed, for some five years of turmoil, fatalities, and disappearances, his attack upon Gellert Grindelwald. Was it lingering affection for the man or fear of exposure as his once best friend that caused Dumbledore to hesitate? Was it only reluctantly that Dumbledore set out to capture the man he was once so delighted he had met?

And how did the mysterious Ariana die? Was she the inadvertent victim of some Dark rite? Did she stumble across something she ought not to have done, as the two young men sat practicing for their attempt at glory and domination? Is it possible that Ariana Dumbledore was the first person to die "for the greater good"?

The chapter ended here and Harry looked up. Hermione had reached the bottom of the page before him. She tugged the book out of Harry's hands, looking a little alarmed by his expression, and closed it without looking at it, as though hiding something indecent.

"Harry —"

But he shook his head. Some inner certainty had crashed down inside him; it was exactly as he had felt after Ron left. He had trusted Dumbledore, believed him the embodiment of goodness and wisdom. All was ashes: How much more could he lose? Ron, Dumbledore,

the phoenix wand . . .

"Harry." She seemed to have heard his thoughts. "Listen to me. It — it doesn't make very nice reading —"

"Yeah, you could say that —"

"— but don't forget, Harry, this is Rita Skeeter writing."

"You did read that letter to Grindelwald, didn't you?"

"Yes, I — I did." She hesitated, looking upset, cradling her tea in her cold hands. "I think that's the worst bit. I know Bathilda thought it was all just talk, but 'For the Greater Good' became Grindelwald's slogan, his justification for all the atrocities he committed later. And . . . from that . . . it looks like Dumbledore gave him the idea. They say 'For the Greater Good' was even carved over the entrance to Nurmengard."

"What's Nurmengard?"

"The prison Grindelwald had built to hold his opponents. He ended up in there himself, once Dumbledore had caught him. Anyway, it's — it's an awful thought that Dumbledore's ideas helped Grindelwald rise to power. But on the other hand, even Rita can't pretend that they knew each other for more than a few months one summer when they were both really young, and —"

"I thought you'd say that," said Harry. He did not want to let his anger spill out at her, but it was hard to keep his voice steady. "I thought you'd say 'They were young.' They were the same age as we are now. And here we are, risking our lives to fight the Dark Arts, and there he was, in a huddle with his new best friend, plotting their rise to power over the Muggles."

His temper would not remain in check much longer: He stood up

and walked around, trying to work some of it off.

"I'm not trying to defend what Dumbledore wrote," said Hermione. "All that 'right to rule' rubbish, it's 'Magic Is Might' all over again. But Harry, his mother had just died, he was stuck alone in the house —"

"Alone? He wasn't alone! He had his brother and sister for company, his Squib sister he was keeping locked up —"

"I don't believe it," said Hermione. She stood up too. "Whatever was wrong with that girl, I don't think she was a Squib. The Dumbledore we knew would never, ever have allowed —"

"The Dumbledore we thought we knew didn't want to conquer Muggles by force!" Harry shouted, his voice echoing across the empty hilltop, and several blackbirds rose into the air, squawking and spiraling against the pearly sky.

"He changed, Harry, he changed! It's as simple as that! Maybe he did believe these things when he was seventeen, but the whole of the rest of his life was devoted to fighting the Dark Arts! Dumbledore was the one who stopped Grindelwald, the one who always voted for Muggle protection and Muggle-born rights, who fought You-Know-Who from the start, and who died trying to bring him down!"

Rita's book lay on the ground between them, so that the face of Albus Dumbledore smiled dolefully at both.

"Harry, I'm sorry, but I think the real reason you're so angry is that Dumbledore never told you any of this himself."

"Maybe I am!" Harry bellowed, and he flung his arms over his head, hardly knowing whether he was trying to hold in his anger or protect himself from the weight of his own disillusionment. "Look

what he asked from me, Hermione! Risk your life, Harry! And again! And again! And don't expect me to explain everything, just trust me blindly, trust that I know what I'm doing, trust me even though I don't trust you! Never the whole truth! Never!"

His voice cracked with the strain, and they stood looking at each other in the whiteness and the emptiness, and Harry felt they were as insignificant as insects beneath that wide sky.

"He loved you," Hermione whispered. "I know he loved you."

Harry dropped his arms.

"I don't know who he loved, Hermione, but it was never me. This isn't love, the mess he's left me in. He shared a damn sight more of what he was really thinking with Gellert Grindelwald than he ever shared with me."

Harry picked up Hermione's wand, which he had dropped in the snow, and sat back down in the entrance of the tent.

"Thanks for the tea. I'll finish the watch. You get back in the warm."

She hesitated, but recognized the dismissal. She picked up the book and then walked back past him into the tent, but as she did so, she brushed the top of his head lightly with her hand. He closed his eyes at her touch, and hated himself for wishing that what she said was true: that Dumbledore had really cared.

Die Lewe en Leuens van Albus Dumbledore

Die son kom op: die lug se suiwer, kleurlose eindeloosheid strek oor hom uit, onverskillig teenoor hom en sy lyding. Harry gaan sit in die tent se ingang en asem 'n diep teug van die skoon lug in. Bloot om te lewe en die son oor die skitterende, sneeubedekte heuwel te sien opkom, behoort die grootste skat op aarde te wees, maar hy kan dit nie waardeer nie: die ramp dat hy sy towerstaf verloor het, het sy sintuie verdoof. Hy kyk uit oor die vallei onder die sneeukombers en hoor kerkklokke in die verte deur die glinsterende stilte beier.

Sonder dat hy dit besef, grawe hy met sy vingers in sy arms asof hy hom teen fisieke pyn probeer verset. Hy het sy eie bloed al meer kere as wat hy kan onthou, sien loop; hy het eenkeer al die bene in sy regterarm verloor. Hierdie reis het hom alreeds littekens op sy borskas en voorarm besorg, saam met die ander op sy hand en voorkop, maar tot op hierdie oomblik het hy nog nooit so noodlottig verswak, gekwes en nakend gevoel nie, asof die beste deel van sy towerkrag van hom weggeskeur is. Hy weet presies wat Hermione sal sê as hy vir haar moet vertel hoe hy voel: die towerstaf is net so goed soos die towenaar. Maar sy is verkeerd, sy geval is anders. Sy het nie gevoel hoe die towerstaf soos 'n kompas se naald in die rondte draai en goue vlamme op sy vyand afvuur nie. Hy het die tweelingkerns se beskerming verloor, en hy besef eers noudat dit weg is hoeveel hy daarop staatgemaak het.

Hy haal die stukkies gebreekte towerstaf uit sy sak en bêre dit in Hagrid se sakkie om sy nek sonder om daarna te kyk. Die sakkie is nou so vol gebreekte en nuttelose voorwerpe dat niks meer daarin sal pas nie. Harry se hand raak deur die Molvel aan die ou Snip en 'n oomblik lank moet hy baklei teen die versoeking om dit uit te haal en weg te gooi. Dit is net so onpeilbaar, onbehulpsaam en nutteloos soos al die ander goed wat Dumbledore agtergelaat het –

En sy woede teenoor Dumbledore breek oor hom soos lawa; dit

verskroei hom van binne en wis alle ander gevoel uit. Hulle het hulleself uit louter desperaatheid oortuig dat Godric's Hollow antwoorde inhou en dat hulle soontoe moet teruggaan, dat dit alles deel van die een of ander geheime pad is wat Dumbledore vir hulle uitgelê het, maar daar is geen kaart en geen plan nie. Dumbledore het hulle gelos om in die duister rond te tas, om alleen en sonder hulp met onbekende, ongekende gruwels te worstel: niks is verduidelik nie, niks is vrywillig gegee nie; hulle het nie die swaard nie en nou het Harry ook nie 'n towerstaf nie. En hy het die foto van die dief laat val en dit gaan beslis nou vir Voldemort maklik wees om uit te vind wie hy was . . . Voldemort het nou al die inligting . . .

"Harry?"

Hermione lyk bevrees dat hy met haar eie towerstaf 'n vloek oor haar sal uitspreek. Haar gesig is gestreep van trane; sy kom hurk langs hom met twee koppies tee bewend in haar hande en iets diks onder haar arm.

"Dankie," sê hy en neem een van die koppies.

"Gee jy om as ek met jou praat?"

"Nee," sê hy, want hy wil nie haar gevoelens seermaak nie.

"Harry, jy wou weet wie die man op die foto is. Wel . . . ek het die boek."

Sy sit dit bedeesd op sy skoot neer: 'n splinternuwe eksemplaar van *Die Lewe en Leuens van Albus Dumbledore*.

"Waar – hoe –?"

"Dit was in Bathilda se sitkamer, dit het net daar gelê . . . Hierdie nota het aan die bokant uitgesteek."

Hermione lees hardop die paar reëls wat in 'n gepunte suurgroen handskrif geskryf is.

" '*Liewe Batty, Dankie vir jou hulp. Hier is 'n eksemplaar van die boek. Hoop jy hou daarvan. Jy het dit alles gesê, selfs al onthou jy dit nie. Rita.*' Ek dink dit moet daar aangekom het toe die regte Bathilda nog gelewe het, maar miskien was sy nie meer in 'n toestand om dit te lees nie?"

"Nee, sy was seker nie."

Harry kyk af na Dumbledore se gesig en voel 'n opwelling van sadistiese genot: nou sal hy alles weet wat Dumbledore nie nodig geag het om hom te vertel nie, of Dumbledore dit so wou hê, of nie.

"Jy's nog steeds baie kwaad vir my, nè?" sê Hermione. Hy kyk op en sien vars trane by haar oë uitloop en besef sy woede moet op sy gesig wys.

"Nee," sê hy sag. "Nee, Hermione, ek weet dit was 'n ongeluk.

Jy't probeer om ons lewend daar uit te kry en jy was ongelooflik. Ek sou dood gewees het as jy nie daar was om my te help nie."

Hy probeer haar flou glimlaggie beantwoord, dan wend hy sy aandag tot die boek. Die rugkant is styf; dit is duidelik nog nooit oopgemaak nie. Hy blaai vinnig daardeur op soek na foto's. Hy kry die een waarna hy soek amper onmiddellik: die jong Dumbledore en sy aantreklike maat wat brul van die lag oor 'n lank reeds vergete grap. Harry se oë gaan af na die onderskrif toe.

Albus Dumbledore kort ná sy ma se dood saam met sy vriend, Gellert Grindelwald.

Harry staar 'n hele paar oomblikke na die laaste woord. Grindelwald. Sy vriend, Grindelwald. Hy kyk skuinsweg na Hermione, wat nog steeds na die naam kyk asof sy haar oë nie kan glo nie. Sy kyk stadig op na Harry.

"Grindelwald?"

Harry ignoreer die res van die foto's en soek in die bladsye om die foto na 'n herhaling van daardie fatale naam. Hy kry dit spoedig en lees gulsig, maar raak verlore: hy moet verder teruggaan om sin uit dit alles te maak, en uiteindelik bevind hy hom aan die begin van 'n hoofstuk getiteld "Vir Almal se Beswil". Hy en Hermione begin dit saam lees:

Met sy agtiende verjaarsdag om die draai verlaat Dumbledore Hogwarts in 'n gloed van glorie – Hoofseun, Prefek, Wenner van die Barnabus Finkley-prys vir Buitengewone Betowerings, Britse Jeugverteenwoordiger aan die Towenaarshoërhof, Goue Medaljewenner vir Baanbrekersbydrae tot die Internasionale Alchemiekonferensie in Kaïro. Dumbledore het beplan om hierna 'n Groot Toer te onderneem met Elphias "Hondasem" Doge, die stompsinnige maar toegewyde trawant wat hy op skool aangekeer het.

Die twee jong mans het in die Stomende Pot in Londen tuisgegaan en gereed gemaak om die volgende oggend na Griekeland te vertrek toe 'n uil daar aankom met die nuus dat Dumbledore se ma dood is. "Hondasem" Doge, wat geweier het om 'n onderhoud vir hierdie boek toe te staan, het vir die publiek sy eie sentimentele weergawe gegee van wat vervolgens gebeur het. Hy gee voor dat Kendra se dood 'n tragiese slag was en dat Dumbledore se besluit om sy ekspedisie te laat vaar 'n edel gebaar van selfopoffering was.

Dumbledore het inderdaad dadelik na Godric's Hollow teruggekeer, kwansuis om na sy jonger broer en suster "om te sien". Maar hoeveel het hy werklik na hulle omgesien?

"Daai Aberforth was van lotjie getik," sê Enid Smeek, wie se gesin

lowntertyd aan die buitewyke van Godric's Hollow gewoon het. "Het amok gemaak. Met sy ma en pa weg, het mens hom natuurlik jammer gekry, maar hy het my aanhoudend met bokmis teen die kop gegooi. Ek dink nie Albus het hom veel aan sy broer gesteur nie; ek het hulle in elk geval nooit saam gesien nie."

So wat het Albus gedoen as hy nie besig was om sy wilde jong broer te troos nie? Die antwoord is blykbaar dat hy seker gemaak het sy suster word steeds gevange gehou. Want hoewel haar eerste bewaarder dood is, het dit niks aan Ariana Dumbledore se jammerlike situasie verander nie. Haar blote bestaan was steeds slegs bekend aan daardie paar buitestanders op wie daar gereken kon word om, soos "Hondasem" Doge, die storie van haar "swak gesondheid" te glo.

Nog 'n vriendin van die gesin wat so maklik tevrede gestel kon word, was Bathilda Bagshot, die gevierde historikus wat al baie jare lank in Godric's Hollow woon. Toe Bathilda die gesin aanvanklik in die dorp probeer verwelkom het, het Kendra haar natuurlik afgejak. Etlike jare later het die skrywer egter 'n uil na Albus in Hogwarts gestuur nadat sy hoogs beïndruk was met sy verhandeling oor Transspesie-transformasie in Transfigurasie Teenswoordig. *Hierdie aanvanklike kontak het daartoe gelei dat sy met die hele Dumbledore-gesin kennis gemaak het. Ten tyde van Kendra se dood was Bathilda die enigste persoon in Godric's Hollow met wie Dumbledore se ma gepraat het.*

Ongelukkig het die briljantheid wat Bathilda vroeër in haar leeftyd openbaar het teen hierdie tyd vervaag. "Die vuur brand, maar die hekseketel is leeg," soos Ivor Dillonsby dit aan my gestel het, of, om Enid Smeek se effens meer aardse stelling aan te haal: "Sy's so deur die mis soos tien miskoeke." Nogtans, *'n kombinasie van beproefde verslaggewingstegnieke het my in staat gestel om genoeg kernbrokkies van die naakte feite te bekom ten einde die hele skandalige storie uit te pluis.*

Soos die res van die towerwêreld skryf Bathilda Kendra se vroeë dood toe aan 'n "boemerangspreuk", 'n storie wat Albus en Alberforth later jare herhaaldelik opgedis het. Sy praat die gesin ook na wat Ariana betref en noem haar "broos" en "delikaat". Wat een onderwerp betref, was Bathilda egter beslis my moeite om Veritaserum te bekom werd, want sy, en net sy, ken die volle verhaal van die bes bewaarde geheim in Albus Dumbledore se lewe. Dit word nou vir die eerste keer onthul en bevraagteken alles wat sy bewonderaars van Dumbledore gedink het: sy sogenaamde haat jeens die Donker Kunste, sy stryd teen die onderdrukking van Moggels, selfs sy toewyding aan sy eie gesin.

Daardie selfde somer wat Dumbledore, nou 'n weeskind en hoof van die gesin, teruggekeer het na Godric's Hollow, het Bathilda Bagshot ingestem om haar kleinneef, Gellert Grindelwald, in haar huis te ontvang.

Die naam Grindelwald is met reg beroemd; die enigste rede hoekom hy nie heel boaan 'n lys van die Gevaarlikste Donker Towenaars van Alle Tye sal wees nie, is omdat Jy-Weet-Wie hom 'n generasie later onttroon het. Aangesien Grindelwald sy terreurveldtog egter nooit na Brittanje uitgebrei het nie, is die besonderhede van sy opgang tot mag nie hier algemeen bekend nie.

Opgevoed aan Durmstrang, 'n skool wat selfs toe reeds berug was vir sy betreurenswaardige verdraagsaamheid teenoor die Donker Kunste, het Grindelwald homself bewys as net so vroegryp en briljant soos Dumbledore. Maar eerder as om sy vermoëns te kanaliseer om toekennings en pryse te verower, het Gellert Grindelwald hom gewy aan ander belangstellings. Op sestienjarige ouderdom kon selfs Durmstrang nie meer sy oë vir Gellert se aweregse eksperimente sluit nie en is hy geskors.

Al wat tot dusver van Grindelwald se daaropvolgende bewegings bekend was, is dat hy " 'n paar maande lank oorsee gaan reis het". Dit kan nou bekend gemaak word dat Grindelwald besluit het om sy groottante in Godric's Hollow te gaan besoek en dat hy daar, al sal dit vir baie 'n geweldige skok wees om dit te hoor, 'n hegte vriendskap aangeknoop het met niemand anders nie as Albus Dumbledore.

"Hy't vir my na 'n sjarmante seun gelyk," babbel Bathilda, "wat ook al later van hom geword het. Ek het hom natuurlik voorgestel aan arme Albus, wat seuns van sy eie ouderdom se geselskap gemis het. Die seuns het dadelik van mekaar gehou."

Hulle het beslis. Bathilda wys vir my 'n brief wat sy gehou het: Albus Dumbledore het dit in die middel van die nag aan Gellert Grindelwald gestuur.

"Ja, selfs nadat hulle die hele dag lank kopstukke gesels het – albei sulke briljante jong seuns, hulle het oor die weg gekom soos Abra en Kadabra – het ek soms 'n uil aan Gellert se kamervenster hoor tik om 'n brief van Albus af te lewer! 'n Idee sou hom te binne skiet, en dan moes hy Gellert dadelik daarvan laat weet!

En watter idees was dit nie. Albus Dumbledore se bewonderaars sal weliswaar diep geskok wees, nietemin, hier is die gedagtes van hul sewentienjarige held, soos oorgedra aan sy nuwe beste vriend ('n afskrif van die brief verskyn op bladsy 463):

Gellert –

Jou punt oor toweroorheersing wat VIR DIE MOGGELS SE EIE BESWIL sal wees – dit is volgens my die deurslaggewende punt. Ja, ons het mag verkry, en ja, daardie mag gee ons die reg om te regeer, maar dit gee ons ook verantwoordelikhede teenoor hulle oor wie ons heers. Ons moet hierdie punt beklemtoon; dit moet die hoeksteen wees waarop ons

hou. Waar ons teenstand kry, wat beslis sal gebeur, moet dit die basis van al ons teenargumente wees. Ons gaan VIR ALMAL SE BESWIL beheer oorneem. En hieruit volg dit dat waar ons teenstand ondervind, ons slegs die nodige geweld moet gebruik, en niks meer nie. (Dis waar jy by Durmstrang 'n fout gemaak het! Maar ek kla nie, want as jy nie geskors was nie, sou ons mekaar nooit ontmoet het nie.)

Albus

Hoe verstom en geskok sy eie bewonderaars ook al mag wees, hierdie brief bewys dat Albus Dumbledore eens op 'n tyd daarvan gedroom het om die Statuut van Geheimhouding omver te werp en towerheerskappy oor Moggels te bewerkstellig. Wat 'n slag vir diegene wat Dumbledore altyd as die voorste kampvegter vir Moggels uitgebeeld het! Hoe leeg voel daardie toesprake ten gunste van Moggelregte nou in die lig van hierdie verdoemende nuwe getuienis! Hoe veragtelik lyk Albus Dumbledore, besig om planne te smee vir sy eie opgang tot mag terwyl hy oor sy ma moes gerou het en na sy suster moes omgesien het!

Mense wat vasbeslote is om Dumbledore op sy verkrummelende troontjie te hou, sal ongetwyfeld kerm dat hy op die ou end nie tot aksie oorgegaan en sy planne uitgevoer het nie, dat hy tot ander insigte moet gekom het, dat hy tot sy sinne gekom het. Die waarheid blyk egter baie meer skokkend te wees.

Skaars twee maande nadat hulle dié wonderlike nuwe vriendskap gesmee het, het Dumbledore en Grindelwald se weë geskei en hulle sou mekaar eers weer sien ten tyde van hul legendariese tweegeveg (sien hoofstuk 22 vir meer hieroor). Wat het hierdie skielike skeuring veroorsaak? Het Dumbledore tot sy sinne gekom? Het hy vir Grindelwald gesê hy wil nie meer deel hê aan sy planne nie? Helaas, nee.

"Ek dink dit was arme klein Ariana se dood," sê Bathilda. "Dit was 'n geweldige skok. Gellert was daar in die huis toe dit gebeur het en hy het die ene bewerasie terug na my toe gekom en vir my gesê hy wil die volgende dag huis toe gaan. In 'n vreeslike toestand, weet jy. So toe het ek 'n Poortsleutel gereël en dit was die laaste sien van hom.

"Albus was buite homself ná Ariana se dood. Dit was so 'n beproewing vir daardie twee broers. Hulle het almal behalwe mekaar verloor. G'n wonder die humeure het effens opgevlam nie. Aberforth het Albus verkwalik, weet jy, soos wat mense maar in sulke omstandighede doen. Maar Aberforth het altyd 'n bietjie oorboord gegaan, die arme seun. Nietemin, dit was onbetaamlik om Albus se neus by die begrafnis te breek. Dit sou Kendra vernietig het om haar seuns so te sien baklei, daar oor haar dogter se liggaam. Dis jammer Gellert kon nie vir die begrafnis bly nie . . . Hy sou Albus ten minste kon getroos het . . ."

Die afgryslike bakleiery langs die kis, waarvan net die enkeles weet wat Ariana Dumbledore se begrafnis bygewoon het, laat verskeie vrae by 'n mens opkom. Hoekom presies het Aberforth Dumbledore Albus vir sy suster se dood geblameer? Het hy, soos wat "Batty" voorgee, bloot onbeheersd uitdrukking gegee aan sy smart? Of was daar dalk 'n meer konkrete rede vir sy woede? Grindelwald, wat uit Durmstrang geskors is vir byna noodlottige aanvalle op medestudente, het enkele ure ná die meisie se dood landuit gevlug en Albus (uit skaamte, of vrees?) het hom nooit weer gesien nie, tot pleidooie uit die towerwêreld hom daartoe gedwing het.

Nóg Dumbledore nóg Grindelwald het skynbaar ooit later in hul lewe melding gemaak van hierdie kortstondige vriendskap as seuns. Daar bestaan egter geen twyfel nie dat Dumbledore sy aanval op Gellert Grindelwald vir bykans vyf jaar van onrus, sterftes en verdwynings uitgestel het. Was dit 'n laaste bietjie toegeneentheid jeens die man, of vrees dat hy as sy eens beste vriend ontmasker sou word, wat Dumbledore laat huiwer het? Het Dumbledore dalk teësinnig vertrek om die man wie se vriendskap hom vroeër soveel vreugde verskaf het, gevange te gaan neem?

En hoe is die geheimsinnige Ariana dood? Was sy onbedoeld die slagoffer van een of ander Donker rite? Het sy op iets afgekom wat nie vir haar oë bedoel was nie terwyl die twee jong manne sit en oefen het vir hul poging tot glorie en oorheersing? Was Ariana Dumbledore dalk die eerste persoon wat "vir almal se beswil" gesterf het?

Die hoofstuk eindig hier en Harry kyk op. Hermione het voor hom aan die einde van die bladsy gekom. Sy trek die boek uit Harry se hande, lyk effens ongerus oor die uitdrukking op sy gesig en maak dit toe sonder om daarna te kyk, asof sy iets onbehoorliks wegsteek.

"Harry –"

Maar hy skud sy kop. 'n Soort innerlike sekerheid het hom met 'n slag getref; dit is presies nes hy gevoel het nadat Ron weg is. Hy het Dumbledore vertrou, geglo hy is die verpersoonliking van goedheid en wysheid. Alles is as: hoeveel meer kan hy verloor? Ron, Dumbledore, die fenikstowerstaf . . .

"Harry." Dit is asof sy sy gedagtes gehoor het. "Luister na my. Dit – dis nie lekker om dit te lees nie –"

"– ja, jy kan so sê –"

"– maar moenie vergeet nie, Harry, dit is Rita Skeeter wat dit geskryf het."

"Het jy daardie brief aan Grindelwald gelees?"

"Ja, ek – ek het." Sy aarsel, lyk ontsteld en druk haar tee vas in

haar koue hande. "Ek dink dis die ergste deel. Ek weet Bathilda het gedink dis alles net praatjies, maar 'Vir Almal se Beswil' het Grindelwald se leuse geword, sy regverdiging vir al die gruweldade wat hy later gepleeg het. En . . . te oordeel hierna . . . lyk dit of Dumbledore vir hom die idee gegee het. Hulle sê 'Vir Almal se Beswil' was selfs bokant Nurmengard se ingang uitgekerf."

"Wat's Nurmengard?"

"Die tronk wat Grindelwald laat bou het om sy teenstanders in toe te sluit. Hy het op die ou end self daarin beland ná Dumbledore hom gevang het. In elk geval, dis – dis aaklig om te dink Dumbledore se idees het Grindelwald gehelp om soveel mag te kry. Maar aan die ander kant kan selfs Rita nie maak asof hulle mekaar een somer langer as twee maande geken het toe hulle albei nog baie jonk was nie, en –"

"Ek het gedink jy sal so sê," sê Harry. Hy wil nie sy woede op haar uithaal nie, maar dit is moeilik om sy stem egalig te hou. "Ek het gedink jy sal sê 'hulle was jonk'. Hulle was net so oud soos ons nou is. En hier is ons besig om ons lewe te waag om teen die Donker Kunste te veg, en daar was hy, besig om saam met sy nuwe beste vriend te konkel en planne te beraam oor hoe hulle mag oor die Moggels gaan verkry."

Hy gaan sy humeur nie baie langer in toom kan hou nie; hy staan op en loop heen en weer in 'n poging om van sy ergste woede ontslae te raak.

"Ek probeer nie dit wat Dumbledore geskryf het, verdedig nie," sê Hermione. "Al daardie 'reg om te regeer'-snert, dis maar net weer 'Towerkrag is Mag' van voor af. Maar Harry, dit was net ná sy ma se dood, hy was alleen in die huis, opgeskeep met homself –"

"Alleen? Hy was nie alleen nie! Hy het sy broer en suster vir geselskap gehad, sy Misoes van 'n suster wat hy opgesluit gehou het –"

"Ek glo dit nie," sê Hermione. Sy staan ook op. "Wat ook al fout was met daai meisie, ek dink nie sy was 'n Misoes nie. Die Dumbledore wat ons geken het, sou nooit, ooit toegelaat het –"

"Die Dumbledore wat ons gedink het ons ken, wou Moggels nie met geweld onderwerp nie!" roep Harry uit. Sy stem weerklink oor die leë heuweltop en 'n hele paar lysters vlieg op en kring krysend in die pêrelagtige lug op.

"Hy't verander, Harry, hy't verander! Dis so eenvoudig soos dit! Miskien hét hy daardie dinge geglo toe hy sewentien was, maar hy het die hele res van sy lewe daaraan gewy om teen die Donker Kunste te veg! Dumbledore was die een wat Grindelwald gekeer

het, die een wat altyd vir Moggelbeskerming en Moggelgeborenes se regte gestem het, wat Jy-Weet-Wie van die begin af beveg het en dood is in sy poging om hom tot 'n val te bring!"

Rita se boek lê op die grond tussen hulle, sodat Albus Dumbledore droewig vir hulle albei glimlag.

"Harry, ek is jammer, maar ek dink die werklike rede hoekom jy so kwaad is, is omdat Dumbledore jou nooit self van al hierdie dinge vertel het nie."

"Miskien is ek!" bulder Harry. Hy gooi sy arms oor sy kop en weet skaars of hy sy woede probeer beteuel of homself teen die impak van sy eie ontnugtering probeer beskerm. "Kyk wat het hy van my gevra, Hermione! Sit jou lewe op die spel, Harry! En weer! En weer! En moenie van my verwag om alles te verduidelik nie, vertrou my net blindelings, vertrou dat ek weet wat ek doen, vertrou my selfs al vertrou ek jou nie! Nooit die volle waarheid nie! Nooit!"

Sy stem kraak van inspanning. Hulle staan en kyk na mekaar in die witheid en die leegheid, en Harry voel hulle is so onbenullig soos insekte onder die uitspansel.

"Hy was lief vir jou," fluister Hermione. "Ek weet hy was lief vir jou."

Harry laat sy arms val.

"Ek weet nie vir wie hy lief was nie, Hermione, maar dit was nooit ek nie. Die gemors waarin hy my gelos het, is nie liefde nie. Hy het 'n honderd keer meer van wat regtig in sy kop aangaan met Gellert Grindelwald gedeel as wat hy ooit met my gedoen het."

Harry tel Hermione se towerstaf wat hy in die sneeu laat val het op en gaan sit weer in die tent se ingang.

"Dankie vir die tee. Ek sal die wagbeurt klaarmaak. Gaan terug binnetoe waar dit warm is."

Sy huiwer, maar weet sy word weggestuur. Sy tel die boek op en loop dan verby hom by die tent in, maar soos sy dit doen, raak sy liggies met haar hand aan die bokant van sy kop. Hy maak sy oë toe by haar aanraking en haat homself dat hy wens dit wat sy gesê het, is waar: dat Dumbledore regtig omgegee het.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



THE SILVER DOE

It was snowing by the time Hermione took over the watch at midnight. Harry's dreams were confused and disturbing: Nagini wove in and out of them, first through a gigantic, cracked ring, then through a wreath of Christmas roses. He woke repeatedly, panicky, convinced that somebody had called out to him in the distance, imagining that the wind whipping around the tent was footsteps or voices.

Finally he got up in the darkness and joined Hermione, who was huddled in the entrance to the tent reading *A History of Magic* by the light of her wand. The snow was still falling thickly, and she greeted with relief his suggestion of packing up early and moving on.

"We'll go somewhere more sheltered," she agreed, shivering as

she pulled on a sweatshirt over her pajamas. "I kept thinking I could hear people moving outside. I even thought I saw somebody once or twice."

Harry paused in the act of pulling on a jumper and glanced at the silent, motionless Sneakoscope on the table.

"I'm sure I imagined it," said Hermione, looking nervous. "The snow in the dark, it plays tricks on your eyes. . . . But perhaps we ought to Disapparate under the Invisibility Cloak, just in case?"

Half an hour later, with the tent packed, Harry wearing the Horcrux, and Hermione clutching the beaded bag, they Disapparated. The usual tightness engulfed them; Harry's feet parted company with the snowy ground, then slammed hard onto what felt like frozen earth covered with leaves.

"Where are we?" he asked, peering around at a fresh mass of trees as Hermione opened the beaded bag and began tugging out tent poles.

"The Forest of Dean," she said. "I came camping here once with my mum and dad."

Here too snow lay on the trees all around and it was bitterly cold, but they were at least protected from the wind. They spent most of the day inside the tent, huddled for warmth around the useful bright blue flames that Hermione was so adept at producing, and which could be scooped up and carried around in a jar. Harry felt as though he was recuperating from some brief but severe illness, an impression reinforced by Hermione's solicitousness. That afternoon fresh flakes drifted down upon them, so that even their sheltered clearing had a fresh dusting of powdery snow.

After two nights of little sleep, Harry's senses seemed more alert

than usual. Their escape from Godric's Hollow had been so narrow that Voldemort seemed somehow closer than before, more threatening. As darkness drew in again Harry refused Hermione's offer to keep watch and told her to go to bed.

Harry moved an old cushion into the tent mouth and sat down, wearing all the sweaters he owned but even so, still shivery. The darkness deepened with the passing hours until it was virtually impenetrable. He was on the point of taking out the Marauder's Map, so as to watch Ginny's dot for a while, before he remembered that it was the Christmas holidays and that she would be back at the Burrow.

Every tiny movement seemed magnified in the vastness of the forest. Harry knew that it must be full of living creatures, but he wished they would all remain still and silent so that he could separate their innocent scurryings and prowlings from noises that might proclaim other, sinister movements. He remembered the sound of a cloak slithering over dead leaves many years ago, and at once thought he heard it again before mentally shaking himself. Their protective enchantments had worked for weeks; why should they break now? And yet he could not throw off the feeling that something was different tonight.

Several times he jerked upright, his neck aching because he had fallen asleep, slumped at an awkward angle against the side of the tent. The night reached such a depth of velvety blackness that he might have been suspended in limbo between Disapparition and Apparition. He had just held up a hand in front of his face to see whether he could make out his fingers when it happened.

A bright silver light appeared right ahead of him, moving through the trees. Whatever the source, it was moving soundlessly. The light seemed simply to drift toward him.

He jumped to his feet, his voice frozen in his throat, and raised Hermione's wand. He screwed up his eyes as the light became blinding, the trees in front of it pitch-black in silhouette, and still the thing came closer. . . .

And then the source of the light stepped out from behind an oak. It was a silver-white doe, moon-bright and dazzling, picking her way over the ground, still silent, and leaving no hoofprints in the fine powdering of snow. She stepped toward him, her beautiful head with its wide, long-lashed eyes held high.

Harry stared at the creature, filled with wonder, not at her strangeness, but at her inexplicable familiarity. He felt that he had been waiting for her to come, but that he had forgotten, until this moment, that they had arranged to meet. His impulse to shout for Hermione, which had been so strong a moment ago, had gone. He knew, he would have staked his life on it, that she had come for him, and him alone.

They gazed at each other for several long moments and then she turned and walked away.

"No," he said, and his voice was cracked with lack of use. "Come back!"

She continued to step deliberately through the trees, and soon her brightness was striped by their thick black trunks. For one trembling second he hesitated. Caution murmured it could be a trick, a lure, a trap. But instinct, overwhelming instinct, told him that this was not

Dark Magic. He set off in pursuit.

Snow crunched beneath his feet, but the doe made no noise as she passed through the trees, for she was nothing but light. Deeper and deeper into the forest she led him, and Harry walked quickly, sure that when she stopped, she would allow him to approach her properly. And then she would speak and the voice would tell him what he needed to know.

At last, she came to a halt. She turned her beautiful head toward him once more, and he broke into a run, a question burning in him, but as he opened his lips to ask it, she vanished.

Though the darkness had swallowed her whole, her burnished image was still imprinted on his retinas; it obscured his vision, brightening when he lowered his eyelids, disorienting him. Now fear came: Her presence had meant safety.

"Lumos!" he whispered, and the wand-tip ignited.

The imprint of the doe faded away with every blink of his eyes as he stood there, listening to the sounds of the forest, to distant crackles of twigs, soft swishes of snow. Was he about to be attacked? Had she enticed him into an ambush? Was he imagining that somebody stood beyond the reach of the wandlight, watching him?

He held the wand higher. Nobody ran out at him, no flash of green light burst from behind a tree. Why, then, had she led him to this spot?

Something gleamed in the light of the wand, and Harry spun about, but all that was there was a small, frozen pool, its cracked black surface glittering as he raised the wand higher to examine it.

He moved forward rather cautiously and looked down. The ice reflected his distorted shadow and the beam of wandlight, but deep

below the thick, misty gray carapace, something else glinted. A great silver cross . . .

His heart skipped into his mouth: He dropped to his knees at the pool's edge and angled the wand so as to flood the bottom of the pool with as much light as possible. A glint of deep red . . . It was a sword with glittering rubies in its hilt. . . . The sword of Gryffindor was lying at the bottom of the forest pool.

Barely breathing, he stared down at it. How was this possible? How could it have come to be lying in a forest pool, this close to the place where they were camping? Had some unknown magic drawn Hermione to this spot, or was the doe, which he had taken to be a Patronus, some kind of guardian of the pool? Or had the sword been put into the pool after they had arrived, precisely because they were here? In which case, where was the person who had wanted to pass it to Harry? Again he directed the wand at the surrounding trees and bushes, searching for a human outline, for the glint of an eye, but he could not see anyone there. All the same, a little more fear leavened his exhilaration as he returned his attention to the sword reposing upon the bottom of the frozen pool.

He pointed the wand at the silvery shape and murmured, "*Accio Sword.*"

It did not stir. He had not expected it to. If it had been that easy, the sword would have lain on the ground for him to pick up, not in the depths of a frozen pool. He set off around the circle of ice, thinking hard about the last time the sword had delivered itself to him. He had been in terrible danger then, and had asked for help.

"Help," he murmured, but the sword remained upon the pool

bottom, indifferent, motionless.

What was it, Harry asked himself (walking again), that Dumbledore had told him the last time he had retrieved the sword? *Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled* that *out of the hat*. And what were the qualities that defined a Gryffindor? A small voice inside Harry's head answered him: *Their daring, nerve, and chivalry set Gryffindors apart.*

Harry stopped walking and let out a long sigh, his smoky breath dispersing rapidly upon the frozen air. He knew what he had to do. If he was honest with himself, he had thought it might come to this from the moment he had spotted the sword through the ice.

He glanced around at the surrounding trees again, but was convinced now that nobody was going to attack him. They had had their chance as he walked alone through the forest, had had plenty of opportunity as he examined the pool. The only reason to delay at this point was because the immediate prospect was so deeply uninviting.

With fumbling fingers Harry started to remove his many layers of clothing. Where "chivalry" entered into this, he thought ruefully, he was not entirely sure, unless it counted as chivalrous that he was not calling for Hermione to do it in his stead.

An owl hooted somewhere as he stripped off, and he thought with a pang of Hedwig. He was shivering now, his teeth chattering horribly, and yet he continued to strip off until at last he stood there in his underwear, barefooted in the snow. He placed the pouch containing his wand, his mother's letter, the shard of Sirius's mirror, and the old Snitch on top of his clothes, then he pointed Hermione's wand at the ice.

"Diffindo."

It cracked with a sound like a bullet in the silence: The surface of the pool broke and chunks of dark ice rocked on the ruffled water. As far as Harry could judge, it was not deep, but to retrieve the sword he would have to submerge himself completely.

Contemplating the task ahead would not make it easier or the water warmer. He stepped to the pool's edge and placed Hermione's wand on the ground, still lit. Then, trying not to imagine how much colder he was about to become or how violently he would soon be shivering, he jumped.

Every pore of his body screamed in protest: The very air in his lungs seemed to freeze solid as he was submerged to his shoulders in the frozen water. He could hardly breathe; trembling so violently the water lapped over the edges of the pool, he felt for the blade with his numb feet. He only wanted to dive once.

Harry put off the moment of total submersion from second to second, gasping and shaking, until he told himself that it must be done, gathered all his courage, and dived.

The cold was agony: It attacked him like fire. His brain itself seemed to have frozen as he pushed through the dark water to the bottom and reached out, groping for the sword. His fingers closed around the hilt; he pulled it upward.

Then something closed tight around his neck. He thought of water weeds, though nothing had brushed him as he dived, and raised his empty hand to free himself. It was not weed: The chain of the Horcrux had tightened and was slowly constricting his windpipe.

Harry kicked out wildly, trying to push himself back to the surface,

but merely propelled himself into the rocky side of the pool. Thrashing, suffocating, he scrabbled at the strangling chain, his frozen fingers unable to loosen it, and now little lights were popping inside his head, and he was going to drown, there was nothing left, nothing he could do, and the arms that closed around his chest were surely Death's. . . .

Choking and retching, soaking and colder than he had ever been in his life, he came to facedown in the snow. Somewhere close by, another person was panting and coughing and staggering around. Hermione had come again, as she had come when the snake attacked. . . . Yet it did not sound like her, not with those deep coughs, not judging by the weight of the footsteps. . . .

Harry had no strength to lift his head and see his savior's identity. All he could do was raise a shaking hand to his throat and feel the place where the locket had cut tightly into his flesh. It was gone: Someone had cut him free. Then a panting voice spoke from over his head.

"Are — you — *mental*?"

Nothing but the shock of hearing that voice could have given Harry the strength to get up. Shivering violently, he staggered to his feet. There before him stood Ron, fully dressed but drenched to the skin, his hair plastered to his face, the sword of Gryffindor in one hand and the Horcrux dangling from its broken chain in the other.

"Why the *hell,*" panted Ron, holding up the Horcrux, which swung backward and forward on its shortened chain in some parody of hypnosis, "didn't you take this thing off before you dived?"

Harry could not answer. The silver doe was nothing, nothing

compared with Ron's reappearance; he could not believe it. Shuddering with cold, he caught up the pile of clothes still lying at the water's edge and began to pull them on. As he dragged sweater after sweater over his head, Harry stared at Ron, half expecting him to have disappeared every time he lost sight of him, and yet he had to be real: He had just dived into the pool, he had saved Harry's life.

"It was y-you?" Harry said at last, his teeth chattering, his voice weaker than usual due to his near-strangulation.

"Well, yeah," said Ron, looking slightly confused.

"Y-you cast that doe?"

"What? No, of course not! I thought it was you doing it!"

"My Patronus is a stag."

"Oh yeah. I thought it looked different. No antlers."

Harry put Hagrid's pouch back around his neck, pulled on a final sweater, stooped to pick up Hermione's wand, and faced Ron again.

"How come you're here?"

Apparently Ron had hoped that this point would come up later, if at all.

"Well, I've — you know — I've come back. If —" He cleared his throat. "You know. You still want me."

There was a pause, in which the subject of Ron's departure seemed to rise like a wall between them. Yet he was here. He had returned. He had just saved Harry's life.

Ron looked down at his hands. He seemed momentarily surprised to see the things he was holding.

"Oh yeah, I got it out," he said, rather unnecessarily, holding up the sword for Harry's inspection. "That's why you jumped in, right?"

“Yeah,” said Harry. “But I don’t understand. How did you get here? How did you find us?”

“Long story,” said Ron. “I’ve been looking for you for hours, it’s a big forest, isn’t it? And I was just thinking I’d have to kip under a tree and wait for morning when I saw that deer coming and you following.”

“You didn’t see anyone else?”

“No,” said Ron. “I —”

But he hesitated, glancing at two trees growing close together some yards away.

“I did think I saw something move over there, but I was running to the pool at the time, because you’d gone in and you hadn’t come up, so I wasn’t going to make a detour to — hey!”

Harry was already hurrying to the place Ron had indicated. The two oaks grew close together; there was a gap of only a few inches between the trunks at eye level, an ideal place to see but not be seen. The ground around the roots, however, was free of snow, and Harry could see no sign of footprints. He walked back to where Ron stood waiting, still holding the sword and the Horcrux.

“Anything there?” Ron asked.

“No,” said Harry.

“So how did the sword get in that pool?”

“Whoever cast the Patronus must have put it there.”

They both looked at the ornate silver sword, its rubied hilt glinting a little in the light from Hermione’s wand.

“You reckon this is the real one?” asked Ron.

"One way to find out, isn't there?" said Harry.

The Horcrux was still swinging from Ron's hand. The locket was twitching slightly. Harry knew that the thing inside it was agitated again. It had sensed the presence of the sword and had tried to kill Harry rather than let him possess it. Now was not the time for long discussions; now was the moment to destroy the locket once and for all. Harry looked around, holding Hermione's wand high, and saw the place: a flattish rock lying in the shadow of a sycamore tree.

"Come here," he said, and he led the way, brushed snow from the rock's surface, and held out his hand for the Horcrux. When Ron offered the sword, however, Harry shook his head.

"No, you should do it."

"Me?" said Ron, looking shocked. "Why?"

"Because you got the sword out of the pool. I think it's supposed to be you."

He was not being kind or generous. As certainly as he had known that the doe was benign, he knew that Ron had to be the one to wield the sword. Dumbledore had at least taught Harry something about certain kinds of magic, of the incalculable power of certain acts.

"I'm going to open it," said Harry, "and you stab it. Straightaway, okay? Because whatever's in there will put up a fight. The bit of Riddle in the diary tried to kill me."

"How are you going to open it?" asked Ron. He looked terrified.

"I'm going to ask it to open, using Parseltongue," said Harry. The answer came so readily to his lips that he thought that he had always known it deep down: Perhaps it had taken his recent encounter with Nagini to make him realize it. He looked at the serpentine *S*, inlaid

with glittering green stones: It was easy to visualize it as a minuscule snake, curled upon the cold rock.

"No!" said Ron. "No, don't open it! I'm serious!"

"Why not?" asked Harry. "Let's get rid of the damn thing, it's been months —"

"I can't, Harry, I'm serious — you do it —"

"But why?"

"Because that thing's bad for me!" said Ron, backing away from the locket on the rock. "I can't handle it! I'm not making excuses, Harry, for what I was like, but it affects me worse than it affected you and Hermione, it made me think stuff — stuff I was thinking anyway, but it made everything worse, I can't explain it, and then I'd take it off and I'd get my head on straight again, and then I'd have to put the effing thing back on — I can't do it, Harry!"

He had backed away, the sword dragging at his side, shaking his head.

"You can do it," said Harry, "you can! You've just got the sword, I know it's supposed to be you who uses it. Please, just get rid of it, Ron."

The sound of his name seemed to act like a stimulant. Ron swallowed, then, still breathing hard through his long nose, moved back toward the rock.

"Tell me when," he croaked.

"On three," said Harry, looking back down at the locket and narrowing his eyes, concentrating on the letter *S*, imagining a serpent, while the contents of the locket rattled like a trapped cockroach. It would have been easy to pity it, except that the cut around Harry's

neck still burned.

"One . . . two . . . three . . . *open.*"

The last word came as a hiss and a snarl and the golden doors of the locket swung wide with a little click.

Behind both of the glass windows within blinked a living eye, dark and handsome as Tom Riddle's eyes had been before he turned them scarlet and slit-pupiled.

"Stab," said Harry, holding the locket steady on the rock.

Ron raised the sword in his shaking hands: The point dangled over the frantically swiveling eyes, and Harry gripped the locket tightly, bracing himself, already imagining blood pouring from the empty windows.

Then a voice hissed from out of the Horcrux.

"I have seen your heart, and it is mine."

"Don't listen to it!" Harry said harshly. "Stab it!"

"I have seen your dreams, Ronald Weasley, and I have seen your fears. All you desire is possible, but all that you dread is also possible. . . ."

"Stab!" shouted Harry; his voice echoed off the surrounding trees, the sword point trembled, and Ron gazed down into Riddle's eyes.

"Least loved, always, by the mother who craved a daughter . . . Least loved, now, by the girl who prefers your friend . . . Second best, always, eternally overshadowed . . ."

"Ron, stab it now!" Harry bellowed: He could feel the locket quivering in his grip and was scared of what was coming. Ron raised the sword still higher, and as he did so, Riddle's eyes gleamed scarlet.

Out of the locket's two windows, out of the eyes, there bloomed, like two grotesque bubbles, the heads of Harry and Hermione, weirdly distorted.

Ron yelled in shock and backed away as the figures blossomed out of the locket, first chests, then waists, then legs, until they stood in the locket, side by side like trees with a common root, swaying over Ron and the real Harry, who had snatched his fingers away from the locket as it burned, suddenly, white-hot.

"Ron!" he shouted, but the Riddle-Harry was now speaking with Voldemort's voice and Ron was gazing, mesmerized, into its face.

"Why return? We were better without you, happier without you, glad of your absence. . . . We laughed at your stupidity, your cowardice, your presumption —"

"Presumption!" echoed the Riddle-Hermione, who was more beautiful and yet more terrible than the real Hermione: She swayed, cackling, before Ron, who looked horrified yet transfixed, the sword hanging pointlessly at his side. *"Who could look at you, who would ever look at you, beside Harry Potter? What have you ever done, compared with the Chosen One? What are you, compared with the Boy Who Lived?"*

"Ron, stab it, STAB IT!" Harry yelled, but Ron did not move: His eyes were wide, and the Riddle-Harry and the Riddle-Hermione were reflected in them, their hair swirling like flames, their eyes shining red, their voices lifted in an evil duet.

"Your mother confessed," sneered Riddle-Harry, while Riddle-Hermione jeered, *"that she would have preferred me as a son, would be glad to exchange . . ."*

"Who wouldn't prefer him, what woman would take you, you are nothing, nothing, nothing to him," crooned Riddle-Hermione, and she stretched like a snake and entwined herself around Riddle-Harry, wrapping him in a close embrace: Their lips met.

On the ground in front of them, Ron's face filled with anguish. He raised the sword high, his arms shaking.

"Do it, Ron!" Harry yelled.

Ron looked toward him, and Harry thought he saw a trace of scarlet in his eyes.

"Ron — ?"

The sword flashed, plunged: Harry threw himself out of the way, there was a clang of metal and a long, drawn-out scream. Harry whirled around, slipping in the snow, wand held ready to defend himself: but there was nothing to fight.

The monstrous versions of himself and Hermione were gone: There was only Ron, standing there with the sword held slackly in his hand, looking down at the shattered remains of the locket on the flat rock.

Slowly, Harry walked back to him, hardly knowing what to say or do. Ron was breathing heavily: His eyes were no longer red at all, but their normal blue; they were also wet.

Harry stooped, pretending he had not seen, and picked up the broken Horcrux. Ron had pierced the glass in both windows: Riddle's eyes were gone, and the stained silk lining of the locket was smoking slightly. The thing that had lived in the Horcrux had vanished; torturing Ron had been its final act.

The sword clanged as Ron dropped it. He had sunk to his knees,

his head in his arms. He was shaking, but not, Harry realized, from cold. Harry crammed the broken locket into his pocket, knelt down beside Ron, and placed a hand cautiously on his shoulder. He took it as a good sign that Ron did not throw it off.

"After you left," he said in a low voice, grateful for the fact that Ron's face was hidden, "she cried for a week. Probably longer, only she didn't want me to see. There were loads of nights when we never even spoke to each other. With you gone . . ."

He could not finish; it was only now that Ron was here again that Harry fully realized how much his absence had cost them.

"She's like my sister," he went on. "I love her like a sister and I reckon she feels the same way about me. It's always been like that. I thought you knew."

Ron did not respond, but turned his face away from Harry and wiped his nose noisily on his sleeve. Harry got to his feet again and walked to where Ron's enormous rucksack lay yards away, discarded as Ron had run toward the pool to save Harry from drowning. He hoisted it onto his own back and walked back to Ron, who clambered to his feet as Harry approached, eyes bloodshot but otherwise composed.

"I'm sorry," he said in a thick voice. "I'm sorry I left. I know I was a — a —"

He looked around at the darkness, as if hoping a bad enough word would swoop down upon him and claim him.

"You've sort of made up for it tonight," said Harry. "Getting the sword. Finishing off the Horcrux. Saving my life."

"That makes me sound a lot cooler than I was," Ron mumbled.

"Stuff like that always sounds cooler than it really was," said Harry. "I've been trying to tell you that for years."

Simultaneously they walked forward and hugged, Harry gripping the still-sopping back of Ron's jacket.

"And now," said Harry as they broke apart, "all we've got to do is find the tent again."

But it was not difficult. Though the walk through the dark forest with the doe had seemed lengthy, with Ron by his side the journey back seemed to take a surprisingly short time. Harry could not wait to wake Hermione, and it was with quickening excitement that he entered the tent, Ron lagging a little behind him.

It was gloriously warm after the pool and the forest, the only illumination the bluebell flames still shimmering in a bowl on the floor. Hermione was fast asleep, curled up under her blankets, and did not move until Harry had said her name several times.

"Hermione!"

She stirred, then sat up quickly, pushing her hair out of her face.

"What's wrong? Harry? Are you all right?"

"It's okay, everything's fine. More than fine. I'm great. There's someone here."

"What do you mean? Who — ?"

She saw Ron, who stood there holding the sword and dripping onto the threadbare carpet. Harry backed into a shadowy corner, slipped off Ron's rucksack, and attempted to blend in with the canvas.

Hermione slid out of her bunk and moved like a sleepwalker toward Ron, her eyes upon his pale face. She stopped right in front of

him, her lips slightly parted, her eyes wide. Ron gave a weak, hopeful smile and half raised his arms.

Hermione launched herself forward and started punching every inch of him that she could reach.

"Ouch — ow — gerroff! What the — ? Hermione — OW!"

"You — complete — *arse* — Ronald — Weasley!"

She punctuated every word with a blow: Ron backed away, shielding his head as Hermione advanced.

"You — crawl — back — here — after — weeks — and — weeks — oh, *where's my wand*?"

She looked as though ready to wrestle it out of Harry's hands and he reacted instinctively.

"Protego!"

The invisible shield erupted between Ron and Hermione: The force of it knocked her backward onto the floor. Spitting hair out of her mouth, she leapt up again.

"Hermione!" said Harry. "Calm —"

"I will not calm down!" she screamed. Never before had he seen her lose control like this; she looked quite demented. "Give me back my wand! *Give it back to me!*"

"Hermione, will you please —"

"Don't you tell me what to do, Harry Potter!" she screeched. "Don't you dare! Give it back now! And YOU!"

She was pointing at Ron in dire accusation: It was like a malediction, and Harry could not blame Ron for retreating several steps.

"I came running after you! I called you! I begged you to come back!"

"I know," Ron said, "Hermione, I'm sorry, I'm really —"

"Oh, you're *sorry*!"

She laughed, a high-pitched, out-of-control sound; Ron looked at Harry for help, but Harry merely grimaced his helplessness.

"You come back after weeks — *weeks* — and you think it's all going to be all right if you just say *sorry*?"

"Well, what else can I say?" Ron shouted, and Harry was glad that Ron was fighting back.

"Oh, I don't know!" yelled Hermione with awful sarcasm. "Rack your brains, Ron, that should only take a couple of seconds —"

"Hermione," interjected Harry, who considered this a low blow, "he just saved my —"

"I don't care!" she screamed. "I don't care what he's done! Weeks and weeks, we could have been *dead* for all he knew —"

"I knew you weren't dead!" bellowed Ron, drowning her voice for the first time, and approaching as close as he could with the Shield Charm between them. "Harry's all over the *Prophet*, all over the radio, they're looking for you everywhere, all these rumors and mental stories, I knew I'd hear straight off if you were dead, you don't know what it's been like —"

"What it's been like for *you*?"

Her voice was now so shrill only bats would be able to hear it soon, but she had reached a level of indignation that rendered her temporarily speechless, and Ron seized his opportunity.

"I wanted to come back the minute I'd Disapparated, but I walked

straight into a gang of Snatchers, Hermione, and I couldn't go anywhere!"

"A gang of what?" asked Harry, as Hermione threw herself down into a chair with her arms and legs crossed so tightly it seemed unlikely that she would unravel them for several years.

"Snatchers," said Ron. "They're everywhere — gangs trying to earn gold by rounding up Muggle-borns and blood traitors, there's a reward from the Ministry for everyone captured. I was on my own and I look like I might be school age; they got really excited, thought I was a Muggle-born in hiding. I had to talk fast to get out of being dragged to the Ministry."

"What did you say to them?"

"Told them I was Stan Shunpike. First person I could think of."

"And they believed that?"

"They weren't the brightest. One of them was definitely part troll, the smell off him. . . ."

Ron glanced at Hermione, clearly hopeful she might soften at this small instance of humor, but her expression remained stony above her tightly knotted limbs.

"Anyway, they had a row about whether I was Stan or not. It was a bit pathetic to be honest, but there were still five of them and only one of me and they'd taken my wand. Then two of them got into a fight and while the others were distracted I managed to hit the one holding me in the stomach, grabbed his wand, Disarmed the bloke holding mine, and Disapparated. I didn't do it so well, Splinched myself again" — Ron held up his right hand to show two missing fingernails; Hermione raised her eyebrows coldly — "and I came out

miles from where you were. By the time I got back to that bit of riverbank where we'd been . . . you'd gone."

"Gosh, what a gripping story," Hermione said in the lofty voice she adopted when wishing to wound. "You must have been simply terrified. Meanwhile we went to Godric's Hollow and, let's think, what happened there, Harry? Oh yes, You-Know-Who's snake turned up, it nearly killed both of us, and then You-Know-Who himself arrived and missed us by about a second."

"What?" Ron said, gaping from her to Harry, but Hermione ignored him.

"Imagine losing fingernails, Harry! That really puts our sufferings into perspective, doesn't it?"

"Hermione," said Harry quietly, "Ron just saved my life."

She appeared not to have heard him.

"One thing I would like to know, though," she said, fixing her eyes on a spot a foot over Ron's head. "How exactly did you find us tonight? That's important. Once we know, we'll be able to make sure we're not visited by anyone else we don't want to see."

Ron glared at her, then pulled a small silver object from his jeans pocket.

"This."

She had to look at Ron to see what he was showing them.

"The Deluminator?" she asked, so surprised she forgot to look cold and fierce.

"It doesn't just turn the lights on and off," said Ron. "I don't know how it works or why it happened then and not any other time, because I've been wanting to come back ever since I left. But I was listening

to the radio really early on Christmas morning and I heard . . . I heard you."

He was looking at Hermione.

"You heard me on the radio?" she asked incredulously.

"No, I heard you coming out of my pocket. Your voice," he held up the Deluminator again, "came out of this."

"And what exactly did I say?" asked Hermione, her tone somewhere between skepticism and curiosity.

"My name. 'Ron.' And you said . . . something about a wand. . . ."

Hermione turned a fiery shade of scarlet. Harry remembered: It had been the first time Ron's name had been said aloud by either of them since the day he had left; Hermione had mentioned it when talking about repairing Harry's wand.

"So I took it out," Ron went on, looking at the Deluminator, "and it didn't seem different or anything, but I was sure I'd heard you. So I clicked it. And the light went out in my room, but another light appeared right outside the window."

Ron raised his empty hand and pointed in front of him, his eyes focused on something neither Harry nor Hermione could see.

"It was a ball of light, kind of pulsing, and bluish, like that light you get around a Portkey, you know?"

"Yeah," said Harry and Hermione together automatically.

"I knew this was it," said Ron. "I grabbed my stuff and packed it, then I put on my rucksack and went out into the garden.

"The little ball of light was hovering there, waiting for me, and when I came out it bobbed along a bit and I followed it behind the shed and then it . . . well, it went inside me."

"Sorry?" said Harry, sure he had not heard correctly.

"It sort of floated toward me," said Ron, illustrating the movement with his free index finger, "right to my chest, and then — it just went straight through. It was here," he touched a point close to his heart, "I could feel it, it was hot. And once it was inside me I knew what I was supposed to do, I knew it would take me where I needed to go. So I Disapparated and came out on the side of a hill. There was snow everywhere. . . ."

"We were there," said Harry. "We spent two nights there, and the second night I kept thinking I could hear someone moving around in the dark and calling out!"

"Yeah, well, that would've been me," said Ron. "Your protective spells work, anyway, because I couldn't see you and I couldn't hear you. I was sure you were around, though, so in the end I got in my sleeping bag and waited for one of you to appear. I thought you'd have to show yourselves when you packed up the tent."

"No, actually," said Hermione. "We've been Disapparating under the Invisibility Cloak as an extra precaution. And we left really early, because, as Harry says, we'd heard somebody blundering around."

"Well, I stayed on that hill all day," said Ron. "I kept hoping you'd appear. But when it started to get dark I knew I must have missed you, so I clicked the Deluminator again, the blue light came out and went inside me, and I Disapparated and arrived here in these woods. I still couldn't see you, so I just had to hope one of you would show yourselves in the end — and Harry did. Well, I saw the doe first, obviously."

"You saw the what?" said Hermione sharply.

They explained what had happened, and as the story of the silver doe and the sword in the pool unfolded, Hermione frowned from one to the other of them, concentrating so hard she forgot to keep her limbs locked together.

"But it must have been a Patronus!" she said. "Couldn't you see who was casting it? Didn't you see anyone? And it led you to the sword! I can't believe this! Then what happened?"

Ron explained how he had watched Harry jump into the pool and had waited for him to resurface; how he had realized that something was wrong, dived in, and saved Harry, then returned for the sword. He got as far as the opening of the locket, then hesitated, and Harry cut in.

"— and Ron stabbed it with the sword."

"And . . . and it went? Just like that?" she whispered.

"Well, it — it screamed," said Harry with half a glance at Ron. "Here."

He threw the locket into her lap; gingerly she picked it up and examined its punctured windows.

Deciding that it was at last safe to do so, Harry removed the Shield Charm with a wave of Hermione's wand and turned to Ron.

"Did you just say you got away from the Snatchers with a spare wand?"

"What?" said Ron, who had been watching Hermione examining the locket. "Oh — oh yeah."

He tugged open a buckle on his rucksack and pulled a short, dark wand out of its pocket. "Here. I figured it's always handy to have a backup."

“You were right,” said Harry, holding out his hand. “Mine’s broken.”

“You’re kidding?” Ron said, but at that moment Hermione got to her feet, and he looked apprehensive again.

Hermione put the vanquished Horcrux into the beaded bag, then climbed back into her bed and settled down without another word.

Ron passed Harry the new wand.

“About the best you could hope for, I think,” murmured Harry.

“Yeah,” said Ron. “Could’ve been worse. Remember those birds she set on me?”

“I still haven’t ruled it out,” came Hermione’s muffled voice from beneath her blankets, but Harry saw Ron smiling slightly as he pulled his maroon pajamas out of his rucksack.

Die Silwer Takbokooi

Dit sneeu teen middernag toe Hermione die wagbeurt oorneem. Harry se drome is verward en ontstellend: Nagini weef in en uit by hulle, eers deur 'n reusagtige, gekraakte ring, dan deur 'n krans krismisrose. Hy word aanhoudend wakker, paniekerig; hy is oortuig iemand roep uit die verte na hom en verbeel hom die wind wat om die tent loei, is voetstappe of stemme.

Uiteindelik staan hy in die donker op en sluit aan by Hermione wat opgekrul in die tent se ingang sit en *'n Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns* by haar towerstaf se lig lees. Die sneeu val nog steeds dig en sy is verlig toe hy voorstel dat hulle vroeg oppak en aanbeweeg.

"Kom ons gaan iewers heen waar dit meer beskut is," stem sy bibberend in terwyl sy 'n sweetpaktop oor haar pajamas aantrek. "Ek het heeltyd gedink ek hoor mense buite beweeg. Ek het een of twee keer selfs gedink ek sien iemand."

Harry is besig om 'n trui oor sy kop te trek, maar kyk nou eers na die stil, beweginglose Loerskoop op die tafel.

"Dit was seker net my verbeelding," sê Hermione wat senuweeagtig lyk, "die sneeu in die donker laat 'n mens se oë snaakse goed sien . . . maar miskien moet ons onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel Disappareer, net vir ingeval?"

'n Halfuur later is die tent opgepak; Harry dra die Horcrux en Hermione hou die kraletjiehandsak styf vas, en hulle Disappareer. Die gewone benoudheid oorval hulle; Harry se voete neem afskeid van die toegesneeude grond en kom hard te lande op wat voel soos bevrore aarde bedek met blare.

"Waar is ons?' vra hy en kyk om hom rond na 'n nuwe massa bome terwyl Hermione die kraletjiehandsak oopmaak en die tentpale begin uittrek.

"Dean se Woud," sê sy. "Ek het eenkeer hier kom kampeer, met my ma en pa."

Hier lê ook sneeu op die bome oral om hulle en dit is bitter koud, maar hulle is ten minste beskut teen die wind. Hulle bly die

meeste van die dag in die tent waar hulle vir warmte styf teen die nuttige helderblou vlamme sit wat Hermione so behendig optower en wat opgeskep en in 'n fles rondgedra kan word. Harry voel of hy herstel van die een of ander kortstondige maar hewige siekte, en Hermione se besorgdheid laat hom nog meer so dink. Die middag sif vars vlokkies op hulle neer sodat selfs hulle beskutte oopte 'n vars lagie poeierige sneeu kry.

Ná twee nagte van min slaap is dit asof Harry se sintuie wakkerder as gewoonlik is. Hulle het so ternouernood uit Godric's Hollow ontsnap dat Voldemort nou nader as voorheen voel, en meer bedreigend. Toe dit weer donker word, wys Harry Hermione se aanbod om wag te staan van die hand en sê vir haar om bed toe te gaan.

Harry dra 'n ou kussing na die tent se opening en gaan sit daarop; ten spyte van die feit dat hy al die truie dra wat hy besit, bewe hy steeds. Die duister verdiep soos die ure verbygaan totdat dit amper ondeurdringbaar is. Hy is op die punt om die Plunderaar se Kaart uit te haal en Ginny se kolletjie 'n ruk lank dop te hou toe hy onthou dit is die Kersvakansie en sy sal nou terug by Die Konynenes wees.

Dit is asof die woud se uitgestrektheid elke klein beweginkie verskerp. Harry weet dit moet vol lewende diere wees, maar hy wens hulle wil almal stil en roerloos bly sodat hy hulle onskuldige geskarrel en gesluip kan onderskei van geluide wat dalk deur ander, onheilspellende bewegings veroorsaak word. Hy onthou die geluid van 'n mantel wat oor dooie blare ritsel, baie jare gelede, en verbeel hom hy hoor dit weer voor hy vir homself sê hy moenie laf wees nie. Hulle beskermende paljasse werk nou al weke lank; hoekom sal dit nou skielik verbreek word? Maar hy kan nogtans nie ontslae raak van die gevoel dat iets vanaand anders is nie.

Hy spring 'n hele paar keer regop. Sy nek is seer, want hy het in 'n ongemaklike posisie teen die kant van die tent aan die slaap geraak. Die nag is later so 'n diep fluweelswart dat hy maklik iewers in die lug tussen Disapparering en Apparering kan hang. Hy het een hand so pas voor sy gesig gehou om te sien of hy sy vingers kan uitmaak toe dit gebeur.

'n Heldersilwer lig verskyn reg voor hom en beweeg deur die bome. Wat ook al die bron is, beweeg geruisloos. Dit lyk of die lig eenvoudig na hom toe aansweef.

Hy spring op, sy stem gevries in sy keel, en lig Hermione se towerstaf. Hy trek sy oë op skrefies toe die lig verblindend word, die bome voor is pikswart silhoeëtte en die ding kom nog steeds nader . . .

En dan verskyn die ligbron skielik van agter 'n eikeboom. Dit is

'n silwerwit takbokooi, maanhelder en skitterend; sy beweeg oor die grond, steeds geruisloos, en laat geen hoefspore in die fyn poeiersneeu agter nie. Sy loop na hom toe, haar pragtige kop met die wye geduierde oë hoog opgelig.

Harry staar verwonderd na die dier, nie omdat sy vreemd is nie, maar omdat sy so onverklaarbaar bekend is. Hy voel hy het gewag dat sy kom, maar dat hy vergeet het, tot op hierdie oomblik, dat hulle afgespreek het om mekaar te ontmoet. Sy impuls om Hermione te roep, wat 'n oomblik gelede so sterk was, het nou verdwyn. Hy weet, hy sal sy lewe daarvoor op die spel plaas, sy is hier vir hom, en hom alleen.

Hulle staar mekaar 'n hele paar lang oomblikke lank aan en dan draai sy om en loop weg.

"Nee," sê hy en sy stem kraak omdat hy so lank nie gepraat het nie. "Kom terug!"

Sy hou aan om doelbewus tussen die bome deur weg te stap en spoedig trek hulle lang swart stamme strepe oor haar helder lyf. Hy huiwer vir een bewende sekonde. Omsigtigheid prewel: dit is dalk 'n set, 'n lokval, 'n valstrik. Maar instink, oorweldigende instink, sê vir hom dit is nie Donker Kuns hierdie nie. Hy sit haar agterna.

Sneeu knars onder sy voete, maar die takbokooi beweeg geluidloos tussen die bome deur, want sy bestaan net uit lig. Sy lei hom dieper en dieper die woud in, en Harry stap vinnig, seker dat wanneer sy stop sy hom sal toelaat om tot naby haar te kom. En dan sal sy praat, en die stem sal vir hom sê wat hy nodig het om te weet.

Uiteindelik gaan sy staan. Sy draai haar pragtig kop nog een keer na hom toe om en hy begin na haar toe hardloop met 'n vraag wat in hom brand, maar toe hy sy mond oopmaak om dit te vra, verdwyn sy.

Al het die donker haar heeltemal ingesluk, is haar blink beeld nog steeds op sy retinas ingeprent; dit maak alles voor hom dof, word helderder toe hy sy ooglede laat sak, disoriënteer hom. Nou kom die vrees: haar teenwoordigheid het hom veilig laat voel.

"*Lumos!*" fluister hy en die punt van die towerstaf vat vlam.

Die beeld van die takbokooi vervaag elke keer dat hy sy oë knip terwyl hy daar staan en luister na die woud se geluide, na takkies wat iewers in die verte kraak en sneeu wat sag suis. Gaan hy enige oomblik aangeval word? Het sy hom in 'n lokval gelei? Verbeel hy hom daar staan iemand buite bereik van die towerstaf se lig en hou hom dop?

Hy lig die towerstaf hoër. Niemand storm op hom af nie, daar

bars nie 'n groen ligflits van agter 'n boom uit nie. Hoekom het sy hom dan hierheen gelei?

Iets blink in die towerstaf se lig en Harry swaai om, maar al wat hy sien, is 'n klein, bevrore waterkuil met 'n gekraakte swart oppervlak wat skitter toe hy die towerstaf hoër lig om dit te bekyk.

Hy beweeg taamlik versigtig nader en kyk af. Die ys weerkaats sy verwronge skaduwee en die towerstaf se ligstraal, maar diep onder die dik, mistige grys dop glinster iets anders. 'n Groot silwer kruis . . .

Sy hart spring in sy keel: hy val op sy knieë langs die kant van die kuil neer en draai die towerstaf om soveel moontlik lig tot op die bodem te laat skyn. 'n Dieprooi glinstering . . . Dit is 'n swaard met skitterende robyne in sy hef . . . Gryffindor se swaard lê op die bodem van die kuil hier in die woud.

Hy haal skaars asem terwyl hy daarna staar. Hoe is dit moontlik? Hoe het dit in 'n kuil in 'n woud beland, so naby aan die plek waar hulle kampeer? Het 'n onbekende towermag Hermione hierheen aangetrek, of is die takbokooi, wat hy aanvaar 'n Patronus is, die een of ander bewaker van die kuil? Of is die swaard in die kuil gesit ná hulle hier aangekom het, juis omdat hulle nou hier is? In daardie geval, waar is die persoon wat dit vir Harry wil gee? Hy rig die towerstaf weer in die rigting van die omringende bome en bosse op soek na 'n menslike buitelyn, die glinstering van 'n oog, maar hy sien niemand daar nie. Nogtans is sy blydskap getemper deur 'n bietjie meer vrees toe hy sy aandag weer by die swaard bepaal wat onderin die bevrore kuil lê.

Hy mik met die towerstaf na die silwerige vorm en prewel: "*Accio swaard.*"

Dit beweeg nie. Hy het nie verwag dit sou nie. As dit so maklik was, sou die swaard voor hom op die grond gelê het, nie in die bevrore kuil se donker dieptes nie, en sou hy dit net kon optel. Hy begin om die yssirkel beweeg en dink diep na oor die laaste keer dat die swaard na hom toe gekom het. Hy was toe in vreeslike gevaar en het hulp gevra.

"Help," prewel hy, maar die swaard bly onder op die bodem van die kuil lê, onverskillig, beweginglоos.

Wat, vra Harry homself af terwyl hy verder loop, het Dumbledore hom vertel die laaste keer toe hy die swaard bekom het? *Net 'n ware Gryffindor sou dit uit die hoed kon haal, Harry.* En wat is die eienskappe van 'n Gryffindor? 'n Stemmetjie in Harry se kop antwoord: *sy waagmoed, durf en ridderlikheid onderskei 'n Gryffindor van ander.*

Harry kom tot stilstand en sug lank en diep; sy wolkerige asem

verdwyn vinnig in die koue lug. Hy weet wat hom te doen staan. As hy eerlik met homself was, sou hy gedink het dit sal dalk hierop uitloop van die oomblik dat hy die swaard deur die ys gesien het.

Hy kyk weer na die omringende bome, maar is nou oortuig niemand gaan hom aanval nie. Hulle het kans gehad om dit te doen toe hy alleen deur die woud geloop het, en meer as genoeg geleentheid terwyl hy die kuil bekyk het. Die enigste rede in hierdie stadium om uit te stel, is omdat die onmiddellike vooruitsig so ongelooflik onsmaaklik is.

Met lomp vingers begin Harry sy vele lae klere uittrek. Hy dink droogweg hy is nie heeltemal seker waar "ridderlikheid" hier inpas nie, tensy dit as ridderlik tel dat hy Hermione nie roep om dit in sy plek te doen nie.

'n Uil hoe-hoe iewers terwyl hy uittrek en hy dink met 'n skerp pyn aan Hedwig. Hy bibber nou, sy tande klap op mekaar, maar hy hou aan uittrek tot hy uiteindelik in sy onderklere staan, kaalvoet in die sneeu. Hy sit die sakkie met sy towerstaf, sy ma se brief, die skerf van Sirius se spieël en die ou Snip bo-op sy klere en dan wys hy met Hermione se towerstaf na die ys.

"Diffindo."

Dit kraak met 'n geluid soos 'n koeël in die stilte: die kuil se oppervlak breek en stukke donker ys wieg op die rimpelende water rond. Sover Harry kan oordeel, is dit nie diep nie, maar om die swaard te kry, sal hy heeltemal onder die water moet gaan.

Om aan die taak wat voorlê te staan en dink, gaan dit nie makliker of die water warmer maak nie. Hy beweeg tot aan die rand van die kuil en sit Hermione se towerstaf, wat steeds lig maak, op die grond neer. Dan probeer hy om nie te dink aan hoeveel kouer hy nou gaan kry of aan hoe vreeslik hy binnekort gaan bibber nie, en spring in.

Elke porie in sy lyf skree uit protes: selfs die lug in sy longe voel of dit solied vries toe hy tot by sy skouers in die ysige water staan. Hy kan skaars asemhaal; terwyl hy so verskriklik bewe dat die water golfies oor die kuil se rand maak, voel hy met sy gevoellose voete na die lem. Hy wil net een keer duik.

Harry stel die oomblik wat hy heeltemal onder die water gaan van sekonde na sekonde uit, snakkend en sidderend, tot hy vir homself sê dit moet gedoen word, en al sy moed bymekaarskraap en duik.

Die koue is ondraaglik: dit val hom soos vuur aan. Dit voel of sy brein gevries is terwyl hy deur die donker water af na die bodem toe beweeg, uitreik en na die swaard gryp. Sy vingers sluit om die hef; hy trek dit boontoe.

Dan sluit iets styf om sy nek. Hy dink aan waterwiere, hoewel niks teen hom geskuur het terwyl hy afgeduik het nie, en lig sy leë hand om hom los te kry. Dit is nie 'n wier nie: die Horcrux se ketting het styfgetrek en druk sy lugpyp nou stadig toe.

Harry skop wild en probeer homself terug na die oppervlak toe opstoot, maar hy beland net teen die kuil se rotsagtige kant. Hy spook en versmoor en gryp na die ketting wat hom verwurg, maar sy gevriesde vingers kry dit nie los nie, en nou ontplof klein liggies in sy kop, en hy gaan verdrink: daar is niks oor nie, niks wat hy kan doen nie, en die arms wat sy borskas omsluit, behoort sekerlik aan die Dood . . .

Stikkend en brakend, papsopnat en kouer as wat hy nog ooit in sy lewe was, kom hy plat op sy gesig in die sneeu by. Iewers naby hom is daar 'n ander persoon wat hyg en hoes en rondstrompel. Hermione het weer gekom, net soos sy gekom het toe die slang hom aangeval het . . . maar dit klink nie na haar nie, nie met daardie diep gehoes nie, nie te oordeel na die gewig van die voetstappe nie . . .

Harry het nie die krag om sy kop op te lig en te sien wie sy redder is nie. Al wat hy kan doen, is om 'n bewende hand na sy keel te bring en te voel aan die plek waar die hangertjie diep in sy vel ingesny het. Dit is weg: iemand het hom losgesny. Dan praat 'n hygende stem bokant sy kop.

"Is – jy – *besimpeld*?"

Niks behalwe die skok om daardie stem te hoor sou Harry die krag gegee het om op te staan nie. Terwyl hy geweldig bibber, strompel hy orent. Daar voor hom staan Ron, ten volle aangetrek maar druipnat, sy hare teen sy gesig vasgeplak, Gryffindor se swaard in een hand en in die ander een die Horcrux wat aan sy gebreekte ketting hang.

"Wat de *hel*," hyg Ron terwyl hy die Horcrux oplig en dit in 'n parodie van hipnose aan sy korter ketting heen en weer swaai, "het jou besiel om nie dié ding af te haal voor jy ingeduik het nie?"

Harry kan nie antwoord nie. Die silwer takbokooi was niks, niks in vergelyking met Ron se verskyning nie; hy kan dit nie glo nie. Bibberend van koue raap hy die hopie klere op wat op die rand van die water lê en begin aantrek. Terwyl hy trui na trui oor sy kop trek, staar Harry na Ron en verwag half hy gaan verdwyn elke keer dat hy hom uit die oog verloor, maar nogtans is dit blykbaar regtig hy: hy het nou net in die kuil geduik en Harry se lewe gered.

"Dit was j – jy?" sê Harry uiteindelik klappertand met 'n stem wat swakker as gewoonlik is van die amperse verwurg.

"Wel, ja," sê Ron en lyk effens verward.

"Het j – jy daardie takbokooi opgetower?

"Wat? Nee, natuurlik nie! Ek dog dit was jou werk!"

"My Patronus is 'n takbok."

"O ja. Ek dog dié een lyk anders. G'n horings nie."

Harry sit Hagrid se sakkie terug om sy nek, trek die laaste trui aan, buk af om Hermione se towerstaf op te tel en draai weer na Ron.

"Wat maak jy hier?"

Ron het skynbaar gehoop hierdie punt word later geopper, indien ooit.

"Wel, ek't – weet jy – ek't teruggekom. As –" hy maak keel skoon, "weet jy, julle my nog wil hê."

Daar is 'n pouse waarin dit voel of die onderwerp van Ron se vertrek soos 'n muur tussen hulle verrys. Nogtans, hy is nou hier. Hy het teruggekom. Hy het Harry se lewe so pas gered.

Ron kyk af na sy hande. Hy lyk 'n oomblik lank verbaas om te sien wat hy daarin vashou.

"O ja, ek het dit uitgekry," sê hy effens onnodig en hou die swaard op sodat Harry daarna kan kyk. "Dis hoekom jy ingespring het, nè?"

"Ja," sê Harry. "Maar ek verstaan nie. Hoe het jy hier gekom? Hoe het jy ons gekry?"

"Lang storie," sê Ron. "Ek soek al ure lank na julle; dis nogal 'n groot woud. En ek het net begin dink ek sal onder 'n boom moet slaap en wag tot dit oggend word toe ek die bok sien aankom, met jou agterna."

"Het jy niemand anders gesien nie?"

"Nee," sê Ron. "Ek –"

Maar hy huiwer en kyk vlugtig na twee bome naby mekaar 'n entjie van hulle af.

"– Ek het gedink ek het iets daar sien beweeg, maar ek was toe besig om na die kuil toe te hardloop, want jy't ingegaan en nie weer opgekom nie, so ek wou nie nog 'n draai loop om – hei!"

Harry hardloop al klaar na die plek waarheen Ron gewys het. Die twee eike groei naby aan mekaar; daar is net 'n klein opening tussen die stamme op oogvlak, 'n ideale plek om deur te sien, maar nie gesien te word nie. Daar is egter nie sneeu op die grond om die wortels nie en Harry sien nêrens 'n teken van voetspore nie. Hy loop terug na waar Ron staan en wag, nog steeds met die swaard en Horcrux in sy hande.

"Enigiets daar?" vra Ron.

"Nee," sê Harry.

"So hoe het die swaard in daardie kuil beland?"

"Wie ook al die Patronus opgetower het, moes dit daar gesit het."

Hulle kyk albei na die swierige silwer swaard; sy robynversierde hef glinster effens in die lig van Hermione se towerstaf.

"Dink jy dis die regte een?" vra Ron.

"Daar's net een manier om uit te vind," sê Harry.

Die Horcrux swaai steeds aan Ron se hand. Die hangertjie ruk effens. Harry weet die ding binne-in is weer ontsteld. Dit het die swaard se teenwoordigheid aangevoel en Harry probeer doodmaak voor hy die swaard kon besit. Dit is nie nou die tyd vir lang besprekings nie; dit is nou die oomblik om die hangertjie eens en vir altyd te vernietig. Harry kyk rond met Hermione se towerstaf hoog opgelig en sien die plek: 'n platterige rots wat in die skadu van 'n plataanboom lê.

"Kom," sê hy en stap voor, vee die sneeu van die rots se oppervlak af en hou sy hand uit vir die Horcrux. Maar toe Ron vir hom die swaard wil gee, skud Harry sy kop.

"Nee, jy moet dit doen."

"Ek?" Ron lyk geskok. "Hoekom?"

"Want jy't die swaard uit die kuil gekry. Ek dink dis bedoel om jy te wees."

Hy probeer nie gaaf of gulhartig wees nie. So seker as wat hy was dat die takbokooi hom goedgesind is, so seker is Harry dat Ron die een moet wees wat die swaard hanteer. Dumbledore het ten minste vir Harry iets geleer van sekere soorte towerkrag, van sekere dade se onberekenbare mag.

"Ek gaan dit oopmaak," sê Harry, "dan steek jy dit met die swaard. Dadelik, oukei? Want wat ook al daarin is, gaan teenstand bied. Die stukkie van Riddle in die dagboek het my probeer doodmaak."

"Hoe gaan jy dit oopmaak?" vra Ron. Hy lyk angsbevange.

"Ek gaan dit vra om oop te gaan, in Parseltaal," sê Harry. Die antwoord kom so geredelik by hom op dat hy dink hy het dit nog altyd geweet, diep binnekant hom: miskien het sy onlangse ontmoeting met Nagini hom dit laat besef. Hy kyk na die slangvormige "S" waarin blink groen steentjies geset is: dit is maklik om dit te sien as 'n minuskule slangetjie wat op die koue rots opgekrul lê.

"Nee!" sê Ron. "Nee, moenie dit oopmaak nie. Ek's ernstig!"

"Hoekom nie?" vra Harry. "Kom ons raak ontslae van die dekselse ding, dis al maande –"

"Ek kan nie, Harry, ek's ernstig – doen jy dit –"

"Maar hoekom?"

"Want daai ding is sleg vir my!" sê Ron en tree terug van die hangertjie op die rots. "Ek kan dit nie hanteer nie! Ek maak nie verskonings vir hoe ek was nie, Harry, maar dit het 'n erger invloed op my gehad as op jou en Hermione. Dit het my goed laat dink, goed wat ek in elk geval gedink het, maar dit het alles erger gemaak, ek kan dit nie verduidelik nie, en dan het ek dit afgehaal en dan het my kop weer reg gewerk, en dan moes ek die flippen ding weer aansit – ek kan dit nie doen nie, Harry!"

Hy retireer kopskuddend met die swaard wat langs hom sleep.

"Jy kan dit doen," sê Harry, "jy kan! Jy't die swaard nou net gekry, ek weet jy's die een wat veronderstel is om dit te gebruik. Asseblief, raak net ontslae daarvan, Ron."

Dit is asof die klank van sy naam soos 'n stimulant op hom inwerk. Ron sluk, en dan, terwyl hy hard deur sy lang neus asemhaal, beweeg hy terug na die rots toe.

"Sê vir my wanneer," sê hy skor.

"Ek tel tot by drie," sê Harry. Hy kyk weer af na die hangertjie, trek sy oë op skrefies, konsentreer op die letter "S" en dink aan 'n slang terwyl die hangertjie se inhoud soos 'n vasgekeerde kakkerlak ratel. Dit sou maklik gewees het om dit te bejammer as dit nie was dat die sny om Harry se nek nog steeds brand nie.

"Een . . . twee . . . drie . . . *Gaan oop.*"

Die laaste woorde word sissend gesnou en die hangertjie se goue deure swaai met 'n klein klikgeluid wyd oop.

Agter albei die glasvensters binne-in knipper 'n lewende oog, so donker en aantreklik soos wat Tom Riddle se oë was voor hy hulle vuurrooi met skrefie-pupille gemaak het.

"Steek," sê Harry en hou die hangertjie op die rots vas.

Ron lig die swaard met bewende hande op: die punt hang oor die oë wat freneties ronddraai en Harry gryp die hangertjie styf vas en verbeel hom hy sien al klaar bloed uit die leë vensters vloei.

Dan sis 'n stem uit die Horcrux.

"Ek het jou hart gesien, en dit is myne."

"Moenie daarna luister nie!" sê Harry streng. "Doen dit!"

"Ek het jou drome gesien, Ronald Weasley, en ek het jou vrese gesien. Alles wat jy begeer, is moontlik, maar alles wat jy vrees, is ook moontlik . . ."

"Steek!" skree Harry; sy stem eggo terug van die omringende bome af, die swaard se punt bewe en Ron staar af in Riddle se oë.

"Die minste bemin, altyd, deur 'n ma wat 'n dogter begeer het . . . Die minste bemin, nou, deur 'n meisie wat jou vriend verkies . . . Tweede beste, altyd, alewig oorskadu . . ."

"Ron, doen dit nou!" brul Harry: hy kan die hangertjie in sy greep voel bewe en is bang vir wat kom. Ron lig die swaard hoër op en terwyl hy dit doen, gloei Riddle se oë vuurrooi.

Uit die hangertjie se twee vensters, uit die oë, groei daar twee groteske borrels: Harry en Hermione se koppe wat vreemd verwring is.

Ron gil van skok en tree terug terwyl die figure uit die hangertjie groei: eers borskaste, dan middellywe, dan bene, totdat hulle in die hangertjie staan, sy aan sy soos bome met 'n gemeenskaplike wortelstelsel, wiegend oor Ron en die regte Harry wat sy vingers weggeruk het van die hangertjie wat nou skielik witwarm brand.

"Ron!" skree hy, maar die Riddle-Harry praat nou met Voldemort se stem en Ron staar hom gehipnotiseer aan.

"Hoekom het jy teruggekom? Ons was beter daaraan toe sonder jou, gelukkiger sonder jou, bly oor jou afwesigheid . . . Ons het gelag oor jou onnoselheid, jou lafhartigheid, jou vermetelheid –"

"Vermetelheid!" eggo die Riddle-Hermione, wat mooier en terselfdertyd aakliger as die regte Hermione is: sy wieg kekkelend voor Ron wat vaalverskrik aan die grond vasgenael is met die swaard wat doelloos langs sy hom hang. *"Wie kan na jou kyk, wie sal ooit na jou kyk, met Harry Potter langs jou? Wat het jy al ooit reggekry in vergelyking met die Uitverkorene? Wat is jy in vergelyking met die Seun Wat Bly Leef Het?"*

"Ron, doen dit, DOEN DIT!" gil Harry, maar Ron beweeg nie: sy oë is oopgesper en die Riddle-Harry en die Riddle-Hermione weerkaats daarin terwyl hulle hare soos vlamme warrel, hulle oë rooi skyn en hulle stemme in 'n bose duet opklink.

"Jou ma het erken," koggel Riddle-Harry grynsend terwyl Riddle-Hermione hoon, *"dat sy my eerder as 'n seun wil hê, dat sy maar te bly sal wees as sy ons kan omruil . . ."*

"Wie sal hom nie bo jou kies nie, watter vrou sal jou vat? Jy is niks, niks, niks in vergelyking met hom nie," singsê Riddle-Hermione en sy rek uit soos 'n slang en vleg haar om Riddle-Harry en druk hom in 'n innige omhelsing vas: hulle lippe ontmoet.

Op die grond voor hulle is Ron se gesig met afgryse vervul: hy lig die swaard met rukkende arms hoog op.

"Doen dit, Ron!" gil Harry.

Ron kyk na hom en Harry verbeel hom hy sien 'n tikkie vuurrooi in sy oë.

"Ron – ?"

Die swaard flits, kom vinnig af: Harry spring uit die pad, daar is 'n gekletter van metaal en 'n lang, uitgerekte gil. Harry swaai om,

glyend in die sneeu, met die towerstaf gereed om homself te verdedig, maar daar is niks om teen te veg nie.

Die monsteragtige verskynsels van hom en Hermione is weg: nou staan net Ron daar. Hy hou die swaard slap in sy hand vas terwyl hy afkyk na die verpletterde oorblyfsels van die hangertjie op die plat rots.

Harry loop stadig na hom toe terug en weet nie mooi wat om te sê of te doen nie. Ron haal swaar asem. Sy oë is glad nie meer rooi nie, maar hulle normale blou, en hulle is nat.

Harry maak of hy dit nie sien nie en buk om die gebreekte Horcrux op te tel. Ron het die glas in albei vensters deurboor: Riddle se oë is weg, en die hangertjie se gevlekte syvoering rook effens. Die ding wat in die Horcrux gelewe het, het verdwyn; sy laaste daad was om Ron te martel.

Die swaard kletter toe Ron dit laat val. Hy kniel met sy kop in sy arms. Hy bewe, maar Harry besef dit is nie van koue nie. Harry druk die stukkende hangertjie in sy sak, kom kniel langs Ron en sit versigtig 'n hand op sy skouer. Hy beskou dit as 'n goeie teken dat Ron dit nie wegklap nie.

"Ná jy weg is," sê hy in 'n lae stem, dankbaar vir die feit dat Ron se gesig weggesteek is, "het sy 'n week lank gehuil. Heel moontlik langer, sy wou net nie hê ek moes dit sien nie. Daar was hoeveel aande dat ons nooit eens met mekaar gepraat het nie. Met jou weg . . ."

Hy kan nie klaarmaak nie; noudat Ron weer hier is, besef Harry eers ten volle hoe moeilik dit vir hulle was sonder hom.

"Sy's soos my suster," gaan hy aan. "Ek het haar lief soos 'n suster en ek dink sy voel dieselfde oor my. Dit was nog altyd so. Ek het gedog jy weet."

Ron antwoord nie, maar draai sy gesig weg van Harry af en vee sy neus snuiwend aan sy mou af. Harry staan weer op en loop na waar Ron sy enorme rugsak 'n entjie verder neergegooi het toe hy na die kuil gehardloop het om te keer dat Harry verdrink. Hy tel dit op sy rug en loop terug na Ron wat opstaan terwyl Harry aangestap kom. Sy oë is bloedbelope, maar hy is uiterlik kalm.

"Ek's jammer," sê hy met 'n dik stem. "Ek's jammer ek het weggegaan. Ek weet ek was – 'n – 'n –"

Hy kyk in die donker rond asof hy hoop 'n erg genoeg woord sal hom byval.

"Jy't vannag soort van daarvoor opgemaak," sê Harry. "Jy't die swaard gekry. Die Horcrux vernietig. My lewe gered."

"Dit laat my baie beter klink as wat ek was," mompel Ron.

"Daardie soort goed klink altyd beter as wat dit regtig was," sê Harry. "Ek probeer al jare om dit vir jou te sê."

Hulle beweeg gelyktydig vorentoe en gooi hulle arms om mekaar; Harry gryp die agterkant van Ron se baadjie, wat nog steeds papnat is, vas.

"En nou," sê Harry toe hulle mekaar los, "al wat ons nou moet doen, is om die tent weer te kry."

Maar dit is nie moeilik nie. Al het dit gevoel of hy lank saam met die takbokooi deur die donker woud gestap het, is dit asof die terugtog met Ron langs hom 'n verbasende kort tydjie neem. Harry kan nie wag om Hermione wakker te maak nie en sy hart klop al hoe vinniger van opgewondenheid toe hy by die tent ingaan met Ron effens agter hom.

Dit is heerlik warm ná die kuil en die woud; die enigste lig word verskaf deur die grasklokkievlamme wat nog steeds in 'n bak op die vloer glinster. Hermione slaap vas, opgekrul onder haar komberse, en roer eers nadat Harry haar naam 'n hele paar keer gesê het.

"Hermione!"

Sy roer, sit dan vinnig regop en vee haar hare uit haar gesig.

"Wat's verkeerd? Harry? Is jy oukei?"

"Ek's oukei, alles is oukei. Meer as oukei. Ek voel fantasties. Hier's iemand hier."

"Wat bedoel jy? Wie –?"

Sy sien Ron, wat daar staan met die swaard in sy hand en water wat op die verslete mat afdrup. Harry gee pad na 'n hoek in die skaduwee, haal Ron se rugsak af en probeer om met die tentseil saam te smelt.

Hermione glip uit haar slaapbank en beweeg soos 'n slaapwandelaar na Ron toe, haar oë vasgenael op sy bleek gesig. Sy stop reg voor hom, haar lippe effens van mekaar, haar oë wyd. Ron gee 'n flou, hoopvolle glimlag en lig sy arms halfpad op.

Hermione werp haarself vorentoe en begin elke stukkie van hom wat sy kan bykom met haar vuiste bydam.

"Eina – au – los my! Wat de –? Hermione – AU!"

"Jou – absolute – *rot* – Ronald – Weasley!"

Sy beklemtoon elke woord met 'n hou: Ron retireer en hou sy kop toe soos Hermione hom volg.

"Jy – kruip – terug – hiernatoe – ná – weke – en – weke – o, *waar's my towerstaf?*"

Sy lyk gereed om dit uit Harry se hande te wring en hy reageer instinktief.

"Protego!"

Die onsigbare skild skiet tussen Ron en Hermione op: die geweld daarvan laat haar agteroor op die vloer neerslaan. Sy spoeg hare uit haar mond en spring weer op.

"Hermione!" sê Harry. "Bedaar –"

"Ek weier om te bedaar!" skree sy. Hy het haar nog nooit voorheen so sien beheer verloor nie; sy lyk heeltemal waansinnig.

"Gee terug my towerstaf! *Gee dit terug!*"

"Hermione, sal jy asseblief nou –"

"Moenie jy vir my sê wat om te doen nie, Harry Potter!" skel sy. "Moenie dit waag nie! Gee dit dadelik terug! En JY!"

Sy beduie wild en beskuldigend na Ron: dit lyk of sy 'n vloek oor hom gaan uitspreek en Harry neem Ron nie kwalik dat hy 'n hele paar tree terugdeins nie.

"Ek het agter jou aangehardloop! Ek het jou geroep! Ek het jou gesmeek om terug te kom!"

"Ek weet," sê Ron. "Hermione, ek's jammer, ek's regtig –"

"O, jy's *jammer*!"

Sy lag, skril en buite beheer; Ron kyk na Harry vir hulp, maar Harry trek net 'n hulpelose gesig.

"Jy kom terug, ná weke – *weke* – en jy dink alles gaan weer oukei wees as jy net sê jy's *jammer*?"

"Wel, wat anders kan ek sê?" roep Ron uit, en Harry is bly hy baklei terug.

"O, ek weet nie!" gil Hermione aaklig sarkasties. "Gebruik jou verstand, Ron, die bietjie wat jy het –"

"Hermione," kom Harry tussenbeide, want hy dink dit is 'n lae hou, "hy't nou net my lewe gered –"

"Ek gee nie om nie!" skree sy. "Ek gee nie om wat hy gedoen het nie! Weke en weke! Ons kon vir al wat hy weet al *dood* gewees het –"

"Ek het geweet julle's nie dood nie!" bulder Ron haar stem vir die eerste keer dood en kom so naby as wat hy kan met die Skildspreuk tussen hulle. "Harry's heeltyd in die *Profeet*, heeltyd oor die radio, hulle soek oral na julle, daar's aanhoudend gerugte en mal stories, ek het geweet ek sal dadelik hoor as julle dood is, jy weet nie hoe dit gevoel het nie –"

"Hoe dit vir *jou* gevoel het?"

Haar stem is nou so skril dat net vlermuise dit binnekort sal kan hoor, maar sy bereik 'n vlak van verontwaardiging wat haar tydelik sprakeloos laat, en Ron benut sy kans.

"Ek wou die oomblik dat ek ge-Disappareer het weer terugkom, maar ek het my in 'n bende Grypers vasgeloop, Hermione, so ek kon nêrens heen gaan nie!"

"'n Bende watse goed?" vra Harry terwyl Hermione haar op 'n stoel neergooi met haar arms en bene so styf gekruis dat dit lyk of sy jare lank gaan sukkel om dit weer los te kry.

"Grypers," sê Ron. "Hulle's oral: bendes wat goud probeer verdien deur Moggelgeborenes en bloedverraaiers te vang; die Ministerie gee 'n beloning vir almal wat aangekeer word. Ek was op my eie en dit lyk of ek dalk nog skoolgaanouderdom is, toe raak hulle baie opgewonde en dog ek's 'n Moggel-geborene wat wegkruip. Ek moes vinnig praat om te keer dat hulle my na die Ministerie toe sleep."

"Wat het jy vir hulle gesê?"

"Gemaak of ek Stan Shunpike is. Eerste mens aan wie ek kon dink."

"En hulle't dit geglo?"

"Hulle is nie eintlik slim nie. Een van hulle is definitief 'n halwe trol, julle moes hom geruik het . . ."

Ron loer na Hermione, duidelik in die hoop dat sy bietjie humor haar week sal maak, maar haar uitdrukking bly strak bokant haar styfgeknoopte ledemate.

"In elk geval, hulle het gestry oor of ek Stan is, of nie. Dit was effens pateties, om eerlik te wees, maar daar was vyf van hulle en net een van my en hulle het my towerstaf afgevat. Toe begin twee van hulle baklei en terwyl die ander se aandag afgetrek was, het ek die een wat my vasgehou het in die maag geslaan, sy towerstaf gegryp, die ou wat myne vasgehou het, Ontwapen en ge-Disappareer. Ek het dit nie so lekker reggekry nie, myself weer Verskeur –" Ron lig sy regterhand op en wys twee vingernaels kom kort; Hermione lig haar wenkbroue kil, "– en toe beland ek myle van waar julle was. Teen die tyd dat ek teruggekom het by die rivieroewer . . . was julle weg."

"Sjoe, wat 'n spannende storie," sê Hermione in die hooghartige stemtoon wat sy gebruik wanneer sy wil seermaak. "Jy moet absoluut angsbevange gewees het. Intussen is ons Godric's Hollow toe, en kom ons dink 'n bietjie wat daar gebeur het, Harry. O ja, Jy-Weet-Wie se slang het daar opgedaag, ons al twee amper doodgemaak en toe verskyn Jy-Weet-Wie self en loop ons met omtrent 'n sekonde mis."

"Wat?" vra Ron en kyk verstom van haar na Harry, maar Hermione ignoreer hom.

"Verbeel jou, om jou vingernaels te verloor, Harry! Dit sit ons swaarkry regtig in perspektief, nè?"

"Hermione," sê Harry sag, "Ron het nou net my lewe gered."

Dit lyk of sy hom nie hoor nie.

"Maar daar is een ding wat ek graag wil hoor," sê sy en kyk stip na 'n plek 'n entjie bokant Ron se kop. "Hoe presies het jy ons vanaand gekry? Dis belangrik. Sodra ons dit weet, kan ons seker maak ons kry nie weer besoekers wat ons nie wil sien nie."

Ron gluur haar aan en haal dan 'n klein silwer voorwerp uit sy jeans se sak.

"Hiermee."

Sy moet na Ron kyk om te sien wat hy vir hulle wys.

"Die Afskakelaar?" vra sy, so verbaas dat sy vergeet om kil en kwaad te lyk.

"Dit sit nie net ligte aan en af nie," sê Ron. "Ek weet nie hoe dit werk of hoekom dit toe, en nie enige ander keer, gebeur het nie, want ek wou al terugkom vandat ek weg is. Maar ek het radio geluister, baie vroeg Kersoggend, en toe hoor ek . . . toe hoor ek jou." Hy kyk na Hermione.

"Jy't my oor die radio gehoor?" vra sy ongelowig.

"Nee, ek het jou uit my sak hoor kom. Jou stem," en hy lig die Afskakelaar weer, "het hieruit gekom."

"En wat presies het ek gesê?" vra Hermione, haar stemtoon iewers tussen skepties en nuuskierig.

"My naam. 'Ron.' En jy't gesê . . . iets van 'n towerstaf . . ."

Hermione word 'n vurige skakering van skarlakenrooi. Harry onthou: dit was die eerste keer dat een van hulle twee Ron se naam hardop gesê het vandat hy die dag weg is; Hermione het dit genoem toe sy gepraat het oor die herstel van Harry se towerstaf.

"So toe haal ek dit uit," gaan Ron verder terwyl hy na die Afskakelaar kyk, "en dit het nie anders of so iets gelyk nie, maar ek was seker ek het jou gehoor. So toe klik ek dit. En toe gaan die lig in my kamer af, maar 'n ander lig verskyn reg buite die venster."

Ron lig sy leë hand en wys voor hom terwyl sy oë fokus op iets wat nóg Harry nóg Hermione kan sien.

"Dit was 'n ligbal; dit het soort van geklop en was blouerig, soos daardie lig wat 'n mens om 'n Poortsleutel kry, weet julle?"

"Ja," sê Harry en Hermione outomaties gelyk.

"Ek het geweet ek moet agterna," sê Ron. "Ek het my goed gegryp en ingepak, toe lig ek my rugsak op en gaan uit tuin toe.

"Die lugballetjie het daar in die lug gehang en vir my gewag, en toe ek uitkom, bons dit 'n entjie voor my uit en ek volg dit tot agter die skuur en toe . . . wel, toe gaan dit by my in."

"Ekskuus?" vra Harry, wat seker is hy het nie reg gehoor nie.

"Dit het soort van na my toe gesweef," sê Ron en beduie met sy

los wysvinger hoe die beweging gelyk het, "tot reg teen my bors en toe – dit het net reguit deurgegaan. Dit was hier," hy raak aan 'n plek naby sy hart, "ek kon dit voel, dit was warm. En toe dit eers in my was, het ek geweet wat ek veronderstel is om te doen, ek het geweet dit sal my vat na waarheen ek moet gaan. So toe Disappareer ek en beland aan die kant van 'n heuwel. Daar was oral sneeu . . ."

"Ons was daar," sê Harry. "Ons het twee nagte daar deurgebring, en die tweede nag het ek gedink ek hoor iemand in die donker rondbeweeg en roep!"

"Ja, wel, dit moet ek gewees het," sê Ron. "Julle beskermende paljasse werk in elk geval, want ek kon julle nie sien nie en ek kon julle nie hoor nie. Maar ek was seker julle is daar iewers, so op die ou end het ek in my slaapsak gekruip en gewag dat een van julle te voorskyn kom. Ek het gedog ek sal julle kan sien wanneer julle die tent oppak."

"Nee, nie regtig nie," sê Hermione. "Ons het elke keer as 'n ekstra voorsorgmaatreël onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel ge-Disappareer. En ons is baie vroeg daar weg, want, soos Harry sê, ons het iemand hoor rondstrompel."

"Wel, ek het toe heeldag daar by die heuwel gebly," sê Ron. "Ek het aanhou hoop julle sal sigbaar word. Maar toe dit begin donker word, het ek geweet ek moes julle misgeloop het, so toe klik ek die Afskakelaar weer en die blou lig kom uit en gaan weer by my in en ek Disappareer en beland in hierdie woud. Ek kon julle steeds nie sien nie, so ek moes maar hoop een van julle sal te voorskyn kom – en Harry het. Wel, ek het die takbokooi natuurlik eerste gesien."

"Jy't die wát gesien?" vra Hermione skerp.

Hulle verduidelik wat gebeur het en soos die storie van die silwer takbokooi en die swaard in die kuil ontvou, kyk Hermione fronsend van die een na die ander en konsentreer so hard dat sy vergeet om haar ledemate styf vasgeknoop te hou.

"Maar dit moet 'n Patronus gewees het!" sê sy. "Kon julle nie sien wie dit optower nie? Het julle niemand gesien nie? En toe lei dit julle na die swaard toe! Ek kan dit nie glo nie! Wat het toe gebeur?"

Ron verduidelik hoe hy gesien het hoe Harry by die kuil in is en gewag het dat hy weer moet opkom; hoe hy besef het iets is verkeerd en toe ingeduik en Harry gered het, en daarna weer terug is om die swaard te kry. Hy kom tot by hoe hulle die hangertjie oopgemaak het, huiwer dan, en Harry gaan aan.

"– en toe steek Ron dit met die swaard stukkend."

"En . . . en toe is dit weg? Sommer net so?" fluister sy.

"Wel, dit . . . dit het geskree," sê Harry en loer onderlangs na Ron. "Hier."

Hy gooi die hangertjie in haar skoot. Sy tel dit versigtig op en bekyk die stukkende vensters.

Harry besluit dit is uiteindelik veilig om dit te doen: hy verwyder die Skildspreuk met 'n swaai van Hermione se towerstaf en draai na Ron.

"Het jy gesê jy't met 'n ekstra towerstaf by die Grypers weggekom?"

"Wat?" vra Ron, wat Hermione dopgehou het terwyl sy die hangertjie bekyk. "O – o ja."

Hy maak 'n gespe van sy rugsak los en haal 'n kort, donker towerstaf uit die voorste sak. "Hier. Ek't gedink dis handig om altyd een in reserwe te hou."

"Jy was reg," sê Harry en hou sy hand uit. "Myne is gebreek."

"Jy speel?" sê Ron, maar op daardie oomblik kom Hermione op die been en hy lyk weer onrustig.

Hermione sit die verslane Horcrux in haar kraletjiehandsak, klim dan terug in haar bed en kom sonder 'n verdere woord tot ruste.

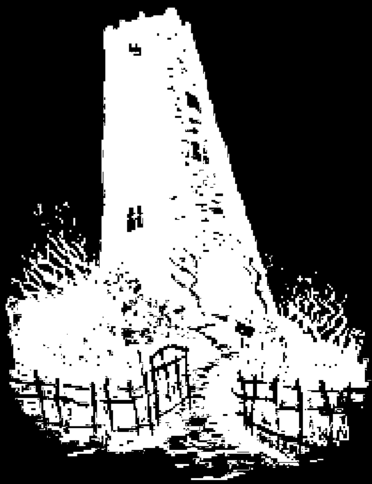
Ron gee die towerstaf vir Harry.

"Omtrent die beste waarvoor jy kon gehoop het," mompel Harry.

"Ja," sê Ron. "Kon erger gewees het. Onthou jy daai voëls wat sy op my losgelaat het?"

"Ek het nog nie besluit om dit *nie* te doen nie," kom Hermione se stem gedemp van onder haar komberse uit, maar Harry sien Ron glimlag effens terwyl hy sy bruinrooi pajamas uit sy rugsak haal.

CHAPTER TWENTY



XENOPHILIUS LOVEGOOD

Harry had not expected Hermione's anger to abate overnight, and was therefore unsurprised that she communicated mainly by dirty looks and pointed silences the next morning. Ron responded by maintaining an unnaturally somber demeanor in her presence as an outward sign of continuing remorse. In fact, when all three of them were together Harry felt like the only non-mourner at a poorly attended funeral. During those few moments he spent alone with Harry, however (collecting water and searching the undergrowth for mushrooms), Ron became shamelessly cheery.

"Someone helped us," he kept saying. "Someone sent that doe. Someone's on our side. One Horcrux down, mate!"

Bolstered by the destruction of the locket, they set to debating the possible locations of the other Horcruxes, and even though they had discussed the matter so often before, Harry felt optimistic, certain that more breakthroughs would succeed the first. Hermione's sulkiness could not mar his buoyant spirits: The sudden upswing in their fortunes, the appearance of the mysterious doe, the recovery of Gryffindor's sword, and above all, Ron's return, made Harry so happy that it was quite difficult to maintain a straight face.

Late in the afternoon he and Ron escaped Hermione's baleful presence again, and under the pretense of scouring the bare hedges for nonexistent blackberries, they continued their ongoing exchange of news. Harry had finally managed to tell Ron the whole story of his and Hermione's various wanderings, right up to the full story of what had happened at Godric's Hollow; Ron was now filling Harry in on everything he had discovered about the wider Wizarding world during his weeks away.

". . . and how did you find out about the Taboo?" he asked Harry after explaining the many desperate attempts of Muggle-borns to evade the Ministry.

"The what?"

"You and Hermione have stopped saying You-Know-Who's name!"

"Oh, yeah. Well, it's just a bad habit we've slipped into," said Harry. "But I haven't got a problem calling him V —"

"NO!" roared Ron, causing Harry to jump into the hedge and Hermione (nose buried in a book at the tent entrance) to scowl over at them. "Sorry," said Ron, wrenching Harry back out of the

brambles, "but the name's been jinxed, Harry, that's how they track people! Using his name breaks protective enchantments, it causes some kind of magical disturbance — it's how they found us in Tottenham Court Road!"

"Because we used his *name*?"

"Exactly! You've got to give them credit, it makes sense. It was only people who were serious about standing up to him, like Dumbledore, who ever dared use it. Now they've put a Taboo on it, anyone who says it is trackable — quick-and-easy way to find Order members! They nearly got Kingsley —"

"You're kidding?"

"Yeah, a bunch of Death Eaters cornered him, Bill said, but he fought his way out. He's on the run now, just like us." Ron scratched his chin thoughtfully with the end of his wand. "You don't reckon Kingsley could have sent that doe?"

"His Patronus is a lynx, we saw it at the wedding, remember?"

"Oh yeah . . ."

They moved farther along the hedge, away from the tent and Hermione.

"Harry . . . you don't reckon it could've been Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore what?"

Ron looked a little embarrassed, but said in a low voice, "Dumbledore . . . the doe? I mean," Ron was watching Harry out of the corners of his eyes, "he had the real sword last, didn't he?"

Harry did not laugh at Ron, because he understood too well the longing behind the question. The idea that Dumbledore had managed to come back to them, that he was watching over them, would have

been inexpressibly comforting. He shook his head.

"Dumbledore's dead," he said. "I saw it happen, I saw the body. He's definitely gone. Anyway, his Patronus was a phoenix, not a doe."

"Patronuses can change, though, can't they?" said Ron. "Tonks's changed, didn't it?"

"Yeah, but if Dumbledore was alive, why wouldn't he show himself? Why wouldn't he just hand us the sword?"

"Search me," said Ron. "Same reason he didn't give it to you while he was alive? Same reason he left you an old Snitch and Hermione a book of kids' stories?"

"Which is what?" asked Harry, turning to look Ron full in the face, desperate for the answer.

"I dunno," said Ron. "Sometimes I've thought, when I've been a bit hacked off, he was having a laugh or — or he just wanted to make it more difficult. But I don't think so, not anymore. He knew what he was doing when he gave me the Deluminator, didn't he? He — well," Ron's ears turned bright red and he became engrossed in a tuft of grass at his feet, which he prodded with his toe, "he must've known I'd run out on you."

"No," Harry corrected him. "He must've known you'd always want to come back."

Ron looked grateful, but still awkward. Partly to change the subject, Harry said, "Speaking of Dumbledore, have you heard what Skeeter wrote about him?"

"Oh yeah," said Ron at once, "people are talking about it quite a lot. 'Course, if things were different, it'd be huge news, Dumbledore

being pals with Grindelwald, but now it's just something to laugh about for people who didn't like Dumbledore, and a bit of a slap in the face for everyone who thought he was such a good bloke. I don't know that it's such a big deal, though. He was really young when they —"

"Our age," said Harry, just as he had retorted to Hermione, and something in his face seemed to decide Ron against pursuing the subject.

A large spider sat in the middle of a frosted web in the brambles. Harry took aim at it with the wand Ron had given him the previous night, which Hermione had since condescended to examine, and had decided was made of blackthorn.

"Engorgio."

The spider gave a little shiver, bouncing slightly in the web. Harry tried again. This time the spider grew slightly larger.

"Stop that," said Ron sharply. "I'm sorry I said Dumbledore was young, okay?"

Harry had forgotten Ron's hatred of spiders.

"Sorry — *Reducio.*"

The spider did not shrink. Harry looked down at the blackthorn wand. Every minor spell he had cast with it so far that day had seemed less powerful than those he had produced with his phoenix wand. The new one felt intrusively unfamiliar, like having somebody else's hand sewn to the end of his arm.

"You just need to practice," said Hermione, who had approached them noiselessly from behind and had stood watching anxiously as Harry tried to enlarge and reduce the spider. "It's all a matter of

confidence, Harry."

He knew why she wanted it to be all right: She still felt guilty about breaking his wand. He bit back the retort that sprang to his lips, that she could take the blackthorn wand if she thought it made no difference, and he would have hers instead. Keen for them all to be friends again, however, he agreed; but when Ron gave Hermione a tentative smile, she stalked off and vanished behind her book once more.

All three of them returned to the tent when darkness fell, and Harry took first watch. Sitting in the entrance, he tried to make the blackthorn wand levitate small stones at his feet; but his magic still seemed clumsier and less powerful than it had done before. Hermione was lying on her bunk reading, while Ron, after many nervous glances up at her, had taken a small wooden wireless out of his rucksack and started to try and tune it.

"There's this one program," he told Harry in a low voice, "that tells the news like it really is. All the others are on You-Know-Who's side and are following the Ministry line, but this one . . . you wait till you hear it, it's great. Only they can't do it every night, they have to keep changing locations in case they're raided, and you need a password to tune in. . . . Trouble is, I missed the last one. . . ."

He drummed lightly on the top of the radio with his wand, muttering random words under his breath. He threw Hermione many covert glances, plainly fearing an angry outburst, but for all the notice she took of him he might not have been there. For ten minutes or so Ron tapped and muttered, Hermione turned the pages of her book, and Harry continued to practice with the blackthorn wand.

Finally Hermione climbed down from her bunk. Ron ceased his tapping at once.

"If it's annoying you, I'll stop!" he told Hermione nervously.

Hermione did not deign to respond, but approached Harry.

"We need to talk," she said.

He looked at the book still clutched in her hand. It was *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*.

"What?" he said apprehensively. It flew through his mind that there was a chapter on him in there; he was not sure he felt up to hearing Rita's version of his relationship with Dumbledore. Hermione's answer, however, was completely unexpected.

"I want to go and see Xenophilius Lovegood."

He stared at her.

"Sorry?"

"Xenophilius Lovegood. Luna's father. I want to go and talk to him!"

"Er — why?"

She took a deep breath, as though bracing herself, and said, "It's that mark, the mark in *Beedle the Bard*. Look at this!"

She thrust *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore* under Harry's unwilling eyes and he saw a photograph of the original letter that Dumbledore had written Grindelwald, with Dumbledore's familiar thin, slanting handwriting. He hated seeing absolute proof that Dumbledore really had written those words, that they had not been Rita's invention.

"The signature," said Hermione. "Look at the signature, Harry!"

He obeyed. For a moment he had no idea what she was talking about, but, looking more closely with the aid of his lit wand, he saw that Dumbledore had replaced the *A* of Albus with a tiny version of the same triangular mark inscribed upon *The Tales of Beedle the Bard.*

"Er — what are you — ?" said Ron tentatively, but Hermione quelled him with a look and turned back to Harry.

"It keeps cropping up, doesn't it?" she said. "I know Viktor said it was Grindelwald's mark, but it was definitely on that old grave in Godric's Hollow, and the dates on the headstone were long before Grindelwald came along! And now this! Well, we can't ask Dumbledore or Grindelwald what it means — I don't even know whether Grindelwald's still alive — but we can ask Mr. Lovegood. He was wearing the symbol at the wedding. I'm sure this is important, Harry!"

Harry did not answer immediately. He looked into her intense, eager face and then out into the surrounding darkness, thinking. After a long pause he said, "Hermione, we don't need another Godric's Hollow. We talked ourselves into going there, and —"

"But it keeps appearing, Harry! Dumbledore left me *The Tales of Beedle the Bard,* how do you know we're not supposed to find out about the sign?"

"Here we go again!" Harry felt slightly exasperated. "We keep trying to convince ourselves Dumbledore left us secret signs and clues —"

"The Deluminator turned out to be pretty useful," piped up Ron. "I think Hermione's right, I think we ought to go and see Lovegood."

Harry threw him a dark look. He was quite sure that Ron's support of Hermione had little to do with a desire to know the meaning of the triangular rune.

"It won't be like Godric's Hollow," Ron added, "Lovegood's on your side, Harry, *The Quibbler*'s been for you all along, it keeps telling everyone they've got to help you!"

"I'm sure this is important!" said Hermione earnestly.

"But don't you think if it was, Dumbledore would have told me about it before he died?"

"Maybe . . . maybe it's something you need to find out for yourself," said Hermione with a faint air of clutching at straws.

"Yeah," said Ron sycophantically, "that makes sense."

"No, it doesn't," snapped Hermione, "but I still think we ought to talk to Mr. Lovegood. A symbol that links Dumbledore, Grindelwald, and Godric's Hollow? Harry, I'm sure we ought to know about this!"

"I think we should vote on it," said Ron. "Those in favor of going to see Lovegood —"

His hand flew into the air before Hermione's. Her lips quivered suspiciously as she raised her own.

"Outvoted, Harry, sorry," said Ron, clapping him on the back.

"Fine," said Harry, half amused, half irritated. "Only, once we've seen Lovegood, let's try and look for some more Horcruxes, shall we? Where do the Lovegoods live, anyway? Do either of you know?"

"Yeah, they're not far from my place," said Ron. "I dunno exactly where, but Mum and Dad always point toward the hills whenever they mention them. Shouldn't be hard to find."

When Hermione had returned to her bunk, Harry lowered his voice.

"You only agreed to try and get back in her good books."

"All's fair in love and war," said Ron brightly, "and this is a bit of both. Cheer up, it's the Christmas holidays, Luna'll be home!"

They had an excellent view of the village of Ottery St. Catchpole from the breezy hillside to which they Disapparated next morning. From their high vantage point the village looked like a collection of toy houses in the great slanting shafts of sunlight stretching to earth in the breaks between clouds. They stood for a minute or two looking toward the Burrow, their hands shadowing their eyes, but all they could make out were the high hedges and trees of the orchard, which afforded the crooked little house protection from Muggle eyes.

"It's weird, being this near, but not going to visit," said Ron.

"Well, it's not like you haven't just seen them. You were there for Christmas," said Hermione coldly.

"I wasn't at the Burrow!" said Ron with an incredulous laugh. "Do you think I was going to go back there and tell them all I'd walked out on you? Yeah, Fred and George would've been great about it. And Ginny, she'd have been really understanding."

"But where have you been, then?" asked Hermione, surprised.

"Bill and Fleur's new place. Shell Cottage. Bill's always been decent to me. He — he wasn't impressed when he heard what I'd done, but he didn't go on about it. He knew I was really sorry. None of the rest of the family know I was there. Bill told Mum he and Fleur weren't going home for Christmas because they wanted to spend it alone. You know, first holiday after they were married. I don't think

Fleur minded. You know how much she hates Celestina Warbeck."

Ron turned his back on the Burrow.

"Let's try up here," he said, leading the way over the top of the hill.

They walked for a few hours, Harry, at Hermione's insistence, hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak. The cluster of low hills appeared to be uninhabited apart from one small cottage, which seemed deserted.

"Do you think it's theirs, and they've gone away for Christmas?" said Hermione, peering through the window at a neat little kitchen with geraniums on the windowsill. Ron snorted.

"Listen, I've got a feeling you'd be able to tell who lived there if you looked through the Lovegoods' window. Let's try the next lot of hills."

So they Disapparated a few miles farther north.

"Aha!" shouted Ron, as the wind whipped their hair and clothes. Ron was pointing upward, toward the top of the hill on which they had appeared, where a most strange-looking house rose vertically against the sky, a great black cylinder with a ghostly moon hanging behind it in the afternoon sky. "That's got to be Luna's house, who else would live in a place like that? It looks like a giant rook!"

"It's nothing like a bird," said Hermione, frowning at the tower.

"I was talking about a chess rook," said Ron. "A castle to you."

Ron's legs were the longest and he reached the top of the hill first. When Harry and Hermione caught up with him, panting and clutching stitches in their sides, they found him grinning broadly.

"It's theirs," said Ron. "Look."

Three hand-painted signs had been tacked to a broken-down gate. The first read,

THE QUIBBLER. EDITOR: X. LOVEGOOD

the second,

PICK YOUR OWN MISTLETOE

the third,

KEEP OFF THE DIRIGIBLE PLUMS

The gate creaked as they opened it. The zigzagging path leading to the front door was overgrown with a variety of odd plants, including a bush covered in the orange radishlike fruit Luna sometimes wore as earrings. Harry thought he recognized a Snargaluff and gave the wizened stump a wide berth. Two aged crab apple trees, bent with the wind, stripped of leaves but still heavy with berry-sized red fruits and bushy crowns of white-beaded mistletoe, stood sentinel on either side of the front door. A little owl with a slightly flattened, hawklike head peered down at them from one of the branches.

"You'd better take off the Invisibility Cloak, Harry," said Hermione. "It's you Mr. Lovegood wants to help, not us."

He did as she suggested, handing her the Cloak to stow in the beaded bag. She then rapped three times on the thick black door, which was studded with iron nails and bore a knocker shaped like an eagle.

Barely ten seconds passed, then the door was flung open and there

stood Xenophilius Lovegood, barefoot and wearing what appeared to be a stained nightshirt. His long white candyfloss hair was dirty and unkempt. Xenophilius had been positively dapper at Bill and Fleur's wedding by comparison.

"What? What is it? Who are you? What do you want?" he cried in a high-pitched, querulous voice, looking first at Hermione, then at Ron, and finally at Harry, upon which his mouth fell open in a perfect, comical O.

"Hello, Mr. Lovegood," said Harry, holding out his hand. "I'm Harry, Harry Potter."

Xenophilius did not take Harry's hand, although the eye that was not pointing inward at his nose slid straight to the scar on Harry's forehead.

"Would it be okay if we came in?" asked Harry. "There's something we'd like to ask you."

"I . . . I'm not sure that's advisable," whispered Xenophilius. He swallowed and cast a quick look around the garden. "Rather a shock . . . My word . . . I . . . I'm afraid I don't really think I ought to —"

"It won't take long," said Harry, slightly disappointed by this less-than-warm welcome.

"I — oh, all right then. Come in, quickly. *Quickly!*"

They were barely over the threshold when Xenophilius slammed the door shut behind them. They were standing in the most peculiar kitchen Harry had ever seen. The room was perfectly circular, so that it felt like being inside a giant pepper pot. Everything was curved to fit the walls — the stove, the sink, and the cupboards — and all of it

had been painted with flowers, insects, and birds in bright primary colors. Harry thought he recognized Luna's style: The effect, in such an enclosed space, was slightly overwhelming.

In the middle of the floor, a wrought-iron spiral staircase led to the upper levels. There was a great deal of clattering and banging coming from overhead: Harry wondered what Luna could be doing.

"You'd better come up," said Xenophilius, still looking extremely uncomfortable, and he led the way.

The room above seemed to be a combination of living room and workplace, and as such, was even more cluttered than the kitchen. Though much smaller and entirely round, the room somewhat resembled the Room of Requirement on the unforgettable occasion that it had transformed itself into a gigantic labyrinth comprised of centuries of hidden objects. There were piles upon piles of books and papers on every surface. Delicately made models of creatures Harry did not recognize, all flapping wings or snapping jaws, hung from the ceiling.

Luna was not there: The thing that was making such a racket was a wooden object covered in magically turning cogs and wheels. It looked like the bizarre offspring of a workbench and a set of old shelves, but after a moment Harry deduced that it was an old-fashioned printing press, due to the fact that it was churning out *Quibbler*s.

"Excuse me," said Xenophilius, and he strode over to the machine, seized a grubby tablecloth from beneath an immense number of books and papers, which all tumbled onto the floor, and threw it over the press, somewhat muffling the loud bangs and clatters. He then faced

Harry.

"Why have you come here?"

Before Harry could speak, however, Hermione let out a small cry of shock.

"Mr. Lovegood — what's that?"

She was pointing at an enormous, gray spiral horn, not unlike that of a unicorn, which had been mounted on the wall, protruding several feet into the room.

"It is the horn of a Crumple-Horned Snorkack," said Xenophilius.

"No it isn't!" said Hermione.

"Hermione," muttered Harry, embarrassed, "now's not the moment —"

"But Harry, it's an Erumpent horn! It's a Class B Tradeable Material and it's an extraordinarily dangerous thing to have in a house!"

"How d'you know it's an Erumpent horn?" asked Ron, edging away from the horn as fast as he could, given the extreme clutter of the room.

"There's a description in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*! Mr. Lovegood, you need to get rid of it straightaway, don't you know it can explode at the slightest touch?"

"The Crumple-Horned Snorkack," said Xenophilius very clearly, a mulish look upon his face, "is a shy and highly magical creature, and its horn —"

"Mr. Lovegood, I recognize the grooved markings around the base, that's an Erumpent horn and it's incredibly dangerous — I don't know where you got it —"

"I bought it," said Xenophilius dogmatically, "two weeks ago, from a delightful young wizard who knew of my interest in the exquisite Snorkack. A Christmas surprise for my Luna. Now," he said, turning to Harry, "why exactly have you come here, Mr. Potter?"

"We need some help," said Harry, before Hermione could start again.

"Ah," said Xenophilius. "Help. Hmm."

His good eye moved again to Harry's scar. He seemed simultaneously terrified and mesmerized.

"Yes. The thing is . . . helping Harry Potter . . . rather dangerous . . ."

"Aren't you the one who keeps telling everyone it's their first duty to help Harry?" said Ron. "In that magazine of yours?"

Xenophilius glanced behind him at the concealed printing press, still banging and clattering beneath the tablecloth.

"Er — yes, I have expressed that view. However —"

"That's for everyone else to do, not you personally?" said Ron.

Xenophilius did not answer. He kept swallowing, his eyes darting between the three of them. Harry had the impression that he was undergoing some painful internal struggle.

"Where's Luna?" asked Hermione. "Let's see what she thinks."

Xenophilius gulped. He seemed to be steeling himself. Finally he said in a shaky voice difficult to hear over the noise of the printing press, "Luna is down at the stream, fishing for Freshwater Plimpies. She . . . she will like to see you. I'll go and call her and then — yes, very well. I shall try to help you."

He disappeared down the spiral staircase and they heard the front door open and close. They looked at each other.

"Cowardly old wart," said Ron. "Luna's got ten times his guts."

"He's probably worried about what'll happen to them if the Death Eaters find out I was here," said Harry.

"Well, I agree with Ron," said Hermione. "Awful old hypocrite, telling everyone else to help you and trying to worm out of it himself. And for heaven's sake keep away from that horn."

Harry crossed to the window on the far side of the room. He could see a stream, a thin, glittering ribbon lying far below them at the base of the hill. They were very high up; a bird fluttered past the window as he stared in the direction of the Burrow, now invisible beyond another line of hills. Ginny was over there somewhere. They were closer to each other today than they had been since Bill and Fleur's wedding, but she could have no idea he was gazing toward her now, thinking of her. He supposed he ought to be glad of it; anyone he came into contact with was in danger, Xenophilius's attitude proved that.

He turned away from the window and his gaze fell upon another peculiar object standing upon the cluttered, curved sideboard: a stone bust of a beautiful but austere-looking witch wearing a most bizarre-looking headdress. Two objects that resembled golden ear trumpets curved out from the sides. A tiny pair of glittering blue wings was stuck to a leather strap that ran over the top of her head, while one of the orange radishes had been stuck to a second strap around her forehead.

"Look at this," said Harry.

"Fetching," said Ron. "Surprised he didn't wear that to the

wedding."

They heard the front door close, and a moment later Xenophilius had climbed back up the spiral staircase into the room, his thin legs now encased in Wellington boots, bearing a tray of ill-assorted teacups and a steaming teapot.

"Ah, you have spotted my pet invention," he said, shoving the tray into Hermione's arms and joining Harry at the statue's side. "Modeled, fittingly enough, upon the head of the beautiful Rowena Ravenclaw. *'Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure!'*"

He indicated the objects like ear trumpets.

"These are the Wrackspurt siphons — to remove all sources of distraction from the thinker's immediate area. Here," he pointed out the tiny wings, "a billywig propeller, to induce an elevated frame of mind. Finally," he pointed to the orange radish, "the Dirigible Plum, so as to enhance the ability to accept the extraordinary."

Xenophilius strode back to the tea tray, which Hermione had managed to balance precariously on one of the cluttered side tables.

"May I offer you all an infusion of Gurdyroots?" said Xenophilius. "We make it ourselves." As he started to pour out the drink, which was as deeply purple as beetroot juice, he added, "Luna is down beyond Bottom Bridge, she is most excited that you are here. She ought not to be too long, she has caught nearly enough Plimpies to make soup for all of us. Do sit down and help yourselves to sugar.

"Now," he removed a tottering pile of papers from an armchair and sat down, his Wellingtoned legs crossed, "how may I help you, Mr. Potter?"

"Well," said Harry, glancing at Hermione, who nodded

encouragingly, "it's about that symbol you were wearing around your neck at Bill and Fleur's wedding, Mr. Lovegood. We wondered what it meant."

Xenophilius raised his eyebrows.

"Are you referring to the sign of the Deathly Hallows?"

Xenophilius Lovegood

Harry het nie verwag Hermione se woede sal oornag oorwaai nie en is dus nie verbaas dat sy die volgende oggend hoofsaaklik deur vuil kyke en snedige stiltes kommunikeer nie. Ron reageer deur 'n onnatuurlik somber houding in haar teenwoordigheid vol te hou as 'n uiterlike teken van voortdurende berou. Wanneer hulle al drie bymekaar is, voel Harry in der waarheid soos die enigste een wat nie treur nie by 'n begrafnis wat swak bygewoon word. Tydens die paar oomblikke dat hy alleen by Harry is (wanneer hulle water gaan haal en tussen die struike na sampioene soek), raak Ron egter skaamteloos opgewek.

"Iemand het ons gehelp," sê hy aanhoudend. "Iemand het daardie takbokooi gestuur. Iemand is aan ons kant. Dis een Horcrux minder, pel!"

Aangevuur deur die hangertjie wat vernietig is, bespreek hulle moontlike plekke waar die ander Horcruxe kan wees, en selfs al het hulle hierdie onderwerp voorheen al so dikwels aangeroer, voel Harry optimisties en seker dat nog deurbrake op die eerste een sal volg. Hermione se norsheid kan nie sy opgeruimde bui bederf nie: die skielike geluk wat na hulle kant toe gekom het, die verskyning van die geheimsinnige takbokooi, die vind van Gryffindor se swaard, en bo alles, Ron se terugkeer, laat Harry so gelukkig voel dat dit heeltemal onmoontlik is om nie te glimlag nie.

Laat die middag ontsnap hy en Ron weer uit Hermione se stug teenwoordigheid en terwyl hulle voorgee om die kaal heinings te fynkam vir braambessies wat nie bestaan nie, ruil hulle verder nuus uit. Harry het dit uiteindelik reggekry om vir Ron die hele storie van sy en Hermione se vele omswerwinge te vertel, insluitende die volle verhaal van wat by Godric's Hollow gebeur het; Ron bring Harry nou op die hoogte van alles wat hy van die wye towerwêreld uitgevind het gedurende die weke dat hy weg was.

". . . en hoe het julle van die Taboe uitgevind?" vra hy vir Harry nadat hy verduidelik het van Moggelgeborenes se vele desperate pogings om die Ministerie te omseil.

"Die wat?"
"Jy en Hermione het opgehou om Jy-Weet-Wie se naam te noem!"
"O ja. Wel, dis net 'n slegte gewoonte waarin ons verval het," sê Harry. "Maar dis nie vir my 'n probleem om hom V –"
"NEE!" brul Ron so hard dat Harry in die heining inspring en Hermione (wat met haar neus begrawe in 'n boek by die tent se ingang sit) hulle fronsend aangluur. 'Skuus," sê Ron en pluk Harry terug uit die braambos, "maar die naam is getoor, Harry, dis hoe hulle mense opspoor! As jy sy naam gebruik, verbreek dit beskermende paljasse, dit veroorsaak die een of ander towerversteuring – dis hoe hulle ons in Tottenham Court-weg gekry het!"
"Omdat ons sy *naam* gebruik het?"
"Presies! Jy moet hulle krediet gee, dit maak sin. Dis net mense wat ernstig daaroor was om teen hom op te staan, soos Dumbledore, wat dit ooit gewaag het om dit te gebruik. Nou't hulle 'n Taboe daarop gesit; enigiemand wat dit sê, kan opgespoor word – 'n vinnige en maklike manier om die Ordelede te kry! Hulle het Kingsley amper gehad –"
"Jy's nie ernstig nie?"
"Ja, Bill sê 'n spul Doodseters het hom in 'n hoek vasgekeer, maar hy't hom losbaklei. Hy's nou op vlug, nes ons." Ron krap sy ken ingedagte met die punt van sy towerstaf. "Jy dink nie Kingsley kon daai Patronus gestuur het nie?"
"Sy Patronus is 'n links. Ons het dit by die troue gesien, onthou jy?"
"O ja . . ."
Hulle beweeg verder met die heining aan, weg van die tent en Hermione af.
"Harry . . . jy dink nie dit kon dalk Dumbledore gewees het nie?"
"Wat van Dumbledore?"
Ron lyk effens verleë, maar sê in 'n lae stem: "Dumbledore . . . die takbokooi? Ek bedoel," Ron hou Harry uit die hoeke van sy oë dop, "hy was die laaste een wat die regte swaard gehad het, of hoe?"
Harry lag nie vir Ron nie, want hy verstaan die hunkering agter die vraag maar te goed. Die idee dat Dumbledore dit reggekry het om na hulle terug te kom, dat hy oor hulle waak, sou onuitspreeklik gerusstellend gewees het. Hy skud sy kop.
"Dumbledore is dood," sê hy. "Ek het dit gesien gebeur, ek het die liggaam gesien. Hy's definitief weg. In elk geval, sy Patronus was 'n feniks, nie 'n takbokooi nie."

"Maar Patronusse kan verander, of hoe?" sê Ron. "Tonks s'n het verander."

"Ja, maar as Dumbledore nog gelewe het, hoekom sal hy homself nie aan ons openbaar nie? Hoekom sal hy die swaard nie net vir ons gee nie?"

"Moenie vir my vra nie," sê Ron. "Oor dieselfde rede dat hy dit nie vir jou gegee het toe hy nog gelewe het nie? Oor dieselfde rede dat hy vir jou 'n ou Snip nagelaat het en vir Hermione 'n kinderstorieboek?"

"Wat wát is?" vra Harry en draai om Ron vol in die gesig te kyk, want hy is desperaat vir die antwoord.

"Ek weet nie," sê Ron. "Partykeer het ek gedink, wanneer ek 'n bietjie suur gevoel het, hy het dit vir die grap gedoen – of hy wou dit net moeiliker gemaak het. Maar ek dink nie so nie, nie meer nie. Hy het geweet wat hy doen toe hy die Afskakelaar vir my gegee het. Hy – wel," Ron se ore word helderrooi en hy raak verdiep in 'n graspol by sy voete wat hy liggies met sy toon skop, "hy moet geweet het ek gaan jou in die steek laat."

"Nee," help Harry hom reg. "Hy moet geweet het jy sal weer terugkom."

Ron lyk dankbaar, maar nog steeds ongemaklik. Deels om die onderwerp te verander, sê Harry: "Gepraat van Dumbledore, het jy gehoor wat Skeeter oor hom geskryf het?"

"O ja," sê Ron dadelik, "mense praat baie daaroor. As dinge anders was, sou dit natuurlik groot nuus gewees het, Dumbledore wat vriende met Grindelwald was, maar nou is dit net vir mense wat nie van Dumbledore gehou het nie iets om oor te lag, en 'n bietjie van 'n klap in die gesig vir almal wat gedink het hy's so 'n goeie ou. Dit traak my in elk geval min. Hy was nog baie jonk toe hulle –"

"Ons ouderdom" kap Harry net soos met Hermione teë en iets in sy gesig laat Ron blykbaar besluit om nie verder op die onderwerp in te gaan nie.

'n Groot spinnekop sit in die middel van 'n gevriesde web in die braambosse. Harry mik daarna met die towerstaf wat Ron die vorige aand vir hom gegee het. Hermione het haar sedertdien verwerdig om dit te ondersoek en het besluit dit is van swartdoring gemaak.

"Engorgio."

Die spinnekop bewe liggies en wip dan effens van die web af op. Harry probeer weer. Hierdie keer word die spinnekop 'n bietjie groter.

"Hou op daarmee," sê Ron skerp. "Ek's jammer ek het gesê Dumbledore was jonk, oukei?"

Harry het vergeet van Ron se haat vir spinnekoppe.

"Ekskuus – *reducio*."

Die spinnekop krimp nie. Harry kyk af na die towerstaf van swartdoring. Elke onbenullige towerspreuk wat hy tot dusver die dag daarmee uitgevoer het, was flouer as dié wat hy met sy feniks-towerstaf opgetower het. Die nuwe een voel soos 'n onbekende indringer, asof iemand anders se hand aan die punt van sy arm vasgewerk is.

"Jy moet net oefen," sê Hermione, wat geruisloos van agter nader gekom het en bekommerd staan en kyk het hoe Harry probeer om die spinnekop groter en kleiner te maak. "Dis alles net 'n kwessie van selfvertroue, Harry."

Hy weet hoekom sy wil hê dit moet oukei wees: sy voel nog steeds skuldig dat sy sy towerstaf gebreek het. Hy sluk die vinnige antwoord wat by sy mond wil uitspring: dat sy die swartdoring-towerstaf kan vat as sy dink dit maak nie 'n verskil nie, en dat hy dan hare sal neem. Hy knik egter sy kop, want hy wil graag hê hulle moet almal weer vriende wees, maar toe Ron versigtig vir Hermione glimlag, stap sy weg en verdwyn weer agter haar boek.

Toe dit donker word, keer al drie terug na die tent en Harry staan eerste wag. Hy sit in die ingang en probeer om klein klippies by sy voete met die swartdoringstaf te laat swewe, maar sy towerkrag is blykbaar steeds lomper en swakker as vroeër. Hermione lê en lees op haar slaapbank terwyl Ron, ná baie senuweeagtige kyke op na haar, 'n klein houtradio uit sy rugsak haal en dit probeer instel.

"Daar's hierdie program," sê hy in 'n lae stem vir Harry, "wat die nuus vertel soos dit rêrig is. Al die ander is aan Jy-Weet-Wie se kant en praat agter die Ministerie aan, maar hierdie een . . . Wag tot jy dit hoor; dis wonderlik. Hulle kan dit net nie elke aand doen nie, hulle moet die hele tyd uitsaaiplekke verander ingeval daar 'n klopjag is, en jy't 'n wagwoord nodig om daarop in te skakel . . . Die probleem is, ek het die laaste een gemis . . ."

Hy trommel liggies met sy towerstaf op die radio en prewel lukraak woorde. Hy loer kort-kort skelmpies na Hermione, duidelik bang vir 'n woedende uitbarsting, maar sy steur haar so min aan hom dat hy net sowel nie daar kon gewees het nie. Ron trommel en mompel so tien minute lank, Hermione blaai haar boek se bladsye om en Harry hou aan om met die swartdoringstaf te oefen.

Uiteindelik klim Hermione van haar slaapbank af. Ron hou onmiddellik op trommel.

"As dit jou irriteer, sal ek stop," sê hy senuagtig vir Hermione.

Hermione verwerdig haar nie om te antwoord nie, maar loop na Harry toe.

"Ons moet praat," sê sy.

Hy kyk na die boek wat sy in haar hand vashou. Dit is *Die Lewe en Leuens van Albus Dumbledore.*

"Wat's dit?" vra hy lugtig. Dit skiet hom te binne dat daar 'n hoofstuk oor hom daarin is; hy is nie seker hy sien kans om Rita se weergawe van sy verhouding met Dumbledore te hoor nie. Hermione se antwoord is egter totaal onverwags.

"Ek wil Xenophilius Lovegood gaan sien."

Hy staar na haar.

"Ekskuus?"

"Xenophilius Lovegood. Luna se pa. Ek wil met hom gaan gesels!"

"E – hoekom?"

Sy asem diep in, asof sy haar staal, en sê: "Dis daardie merk, die merk in *Beedle die Skrywer*. Kyk hier!"

Sy druk *Die Lewe en Leuens van Albus Dumbledore* onder Harry se onwillige oë in en hy sien 'n foto van die oorspronklike brief wat Dumbledore vir Grindelwald geskryf het, in Dumbledore se bekende dun, skuins handskrif. Hy haat dit om die voldonge bewys te sien dat Dumbledore werklik daardie woorde geskryf het, dat dit nie 'n versinsel van Rita is nie.

"Die handtekening," sê Hermione. "Kyk na die handtekening, Harry!"

Hy maak so. Vir 'n oomblik het hy nie 'n idee waarvan sy praat nie, maar dan kyk hy van naderby met behulp van sy towerstaflig en sien Dumbledore het die "A" van Albus vervang deur 'n klein weergawe van dieselfde driehoekige merk wat iemand in *Die Verhale van Beedle die Skrywer* geteken het.

"E – wat probeer jy –?" vra Ron behoedsaam, maar Hermione maak hom met 'n kyk stil en draai weer na Harry.

"Dit duik aanhoudend op, nie waar nie?" sê sy. "Ek weet Viktor het gesê dit is Grindelwald se merk, maar dit was definitief op daardie ou graf in Godric's Hollow, en die datums op daai grafsteen was lank voor Grindelwald se tyd. En nou dit! Wel, ons kan nie vir Dumbledore of Grindelwald vra wat dit beteken nie – ek weet nie eens of Grindelwald nog lewe nie – maar ons kan vir meneer Lovegood gaan vra. Hy het die simbool by die troue gedra. Ek is seker dis belangrik, Harry!"

Harry antwoord nie dadelik nie. Hy kyk na haar intense, gretige gesig en dan uit na die duister om hulle en dink diep. Ná 'n lang

stilte sê hy: "Hermione, ons soek nie nog 'n Godric's Hollow nie. Ons het onsself oortuig ons moet soontoe gaan, en –"

"Maar dit hou aan opduik, Harry! Dumbledore het *Die Verhale van Beedle die Skrywer* aan my bemaak; hoe weet jy ons is nie veronderstel om meer oor die teken uit te vind nie?"

"Hier gaan ons weer!" Harry voel effens geïrriteerd. "Ons hou aan om onsself te probeer oortuig Dumbledore het vir ons geheime tekens en leidrade gelos –"

"Die Afskakelaar was op die ou end baie handig," praat Ron tussenin. "Ek dink Hermione is reg, ek dink ons moet Lovegood gaan besoek."

Harry werp 'n donker blik in sy rigting. Hy is seker die feit dat Ron Hermione ondersteun, het niks te doen met 'n begeerte om te weet wat die driehoekige rune beteken nie.

"Dit sal nie soos Godric's Hollow wees nie," voeg Ron by, "want Lovegood is aan jou kant, Harry. *Die Vitter* was nog al die tyd aan jou kant; dit sê aanmekaar vir almal hulle moet jou help!"

"Ek is seker dit is belangrik!" sê Hermione ernstig.

"Maar dink jy nie as dit belangrik was, sou Dumbledore my daarvan vertel het voor hy dood is nie?"

"Miskien . . . miskien is dit iets wat jy vir jouself moet uitvind?" sê Hermione, wat klink of sy na strooihalms gryp.

"Ja," sê Ron kruiperig, "dit maak sin."

"Nee, dit maak nie!" kap Hermione terug. "Maar ek dink nog steeds ons moet met meneer Lovegood gaan praat. 'n Simbool wat Dumbledore, Grindelwald en Godric's Hollow met mekaar verbind? Harry, ek's seker ons behoort daarvan te weet!"

"Ek dink ons moet daaroor stem," sê Ron. "Almal ten gunste daarvan dat ons Lovegood gaan besoek –"

Sy hand vlieg voor Hermione s'n in die lug op. Haar lippe bewe agterdogtig terwyl sy hare oplig.

"Uitgestem, Harry, jammer," sê Ron en klop hom op die rug.

"Nou goed," sê Harry halfgeamuseerd, halfgeïrriteerd. "Maar ná ons by Lovegood was, gaan ons nog Horcruxe probeer kry, oukei? Waar woon die Lovegoods in elk geval? Weet een van julle?"

"Ja, hulle's nie ver van ons huis af nie," sê Ron. "Ek weet nie presies waar nie, maar Ma en Pa beduie altyd na die heuwels as hulle van hulle praat. Behoort nie te moeilik wees om te kry nie."

Toe Hermione terug na haar slaapbank toe is, laat sak Harry sy stem.

"Jy't net saamgestem om weer in haar goeie boekies te kom."

"In liefde en oorlog is alles toelaatbaar," sê Ron opgewek, "en dis

'n bietjie van albei hierdie. Komaan, dis die Kersvakansie; Luna sal by die huis wees!"

Hulle het 'n uitstekende uitsig oor die dorpie Ottery St Catchpole vanaf die winderige heuwel waarnatoe hulle die volgende oggend Disappareer. Van hulle hoë uitkykpunt af lyk die dorpie soos 'n versameling speelgoedhuisies in die groot, skuins skagte sonlig wat deur openinge tussen die wolke af aarde toe strek. Hulle staan vir 'n oomblik of twee met hulle hande bo hulle oë en kyk af na Die Konynenes, maar al wat hulle kan uitmaak, is die hoë heinings en vrugtebome van die boord wat die skewe huisie teen Moggeloë beskerm.

"Dis snaaks om so naby te wees, maar nie te kan gaan kuier nie," sê Ron.

"Wel, dis nie asof jy hulle lanklaas gesien het nie. Jy was daar vir Kersfees," sê Hermione kil.

"Ek was nie by Die Konynenes nie!" sê Ron met 'n ongelowige laggie. "Dink jy ek sou terug soontoe gaan en vir hulle vertel ek het julle in die steek gelaat? Ja, Fred en George sou glad nie omgegee het nie. En Ginny, sy sou dit regtig verstaan het."

"Maar waar was jy dan?" vra Hermione verbaas.

"Bill en Fleur se nuwe huis. Die Skulphuisie. Bill het my nog altyd ordentlik behandel. Hy – hy was nie beïndruk toe hy hoor wat ek gedoen het nie, maar hy't nie daaroor te kere gegaan nie. Hy't geweet ek is regtig jammer. Nie een van die res van die familie weet ek was daar nie. Bill het vir Ma gesê hy en Fleur kom nie vir Kersfees huis toe nie, want hulle wil dit alleen deurbring. Weet jy, die eerste vakansie ná hulle getroud is. Ek dink nie Fleur het omgegee nie. Jy weet mos hoe haat sy Celestina Warbeck."

Ron draai sy rug op Die Konynenes.

"Kom ons probeer hierbo," sê hy en loop vooruit oor die heuweltop.

Hulle stap 'n paar uur lank, met Harry wat op Hermione se aandrang onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel weggesteek is. Die klompie lae heuwels lyk onbewoon, afgesien van een klein huisie wat verlate voorkom.

"Dink julle dis hulle s'n, en dat hulle weg is vir Kersfees?" vra Hermione terwyl sy deur die venster loer na die netjiese kombuisie met malvas op die vensterbank. Ron snork.

"Luister, ek het 'n gevoel 'n mens sal weet wie daar bly as jy by die Lovegoods se vensters inkyk. Kom ons probeer die volgende klomp heuwels."

Hulle Disappareer dus 'n paar myl verder noord.

"Aha!" roep Ron uit terwyl die wind hulle hare en klere deurmekaar waai. Ron wys boontoe, na die top van die heuwel waarop hulle verskyn het waar 'n baie vreemde huis vertikaal teen die lug opstaan: 'n groot swart silinder met 'n spokerige maan wat daaragter in die middaglug hang. "Dit moet Luna se huis wees, wie anders sal in so 'n plek bly? Dit lyk nes 'n reusekasteel!"

"Dis g'n soos 'n kasteel nie," sê Hermione en kyk fronsend na die gebou.

"Ek het van 'n kasteel in skaak gepraat," sê Ron. "'n Toring vir jou."

Ron se bene is die langste en hy is eerste bo-op die heuwel. Toe Harry en Hermione hom hygend en met hulle hande op die steke in hulle sye inhaal, sien hulle hy glimlag breed.

"Dis hulle s'n," sê Ron. "Kyk."

Drie handgeverfde kennisgewings is aan 'n lendelam hekkie vasgespyker. Die eerste een lees: *"Die Vitter. Redakteur: X. Lovegood,"* die tweede een: *"Pluk jou eie mistel,"* en die derde een: *"Bly weg van die Lugskippruime af."*

Die hekkie piep toe hulle dit oopmaak. Die kronkelpaadjie wat na die voordeur toe lei, is oorgroei met 'n verskeidenheid vreemde plante, insluitende 'n bos oortrek met die oranje, radysagtige vrugte wat Luna soms as oorbelle dra. Harry verbeel hom hy herken 'n Snargaloef en loop 'n wye draai om die knoetserige stomp. Twee ou houtappelbome, krom van die wind, gestroop van blare maar nog steeds vol bessiegroot rooi vrugte en bosserige krone wit gespikkelde mistel, staan wag aan weerskante van die voordeur. 'n Uiltjie met 'n effens plat, valkagtige kop loer van een van die takke af na hulle toe.

"Jy moet liewer die Onsigbaarheidsmantel afhaal, Harry," sê Hermione, "Dis vir jou dat meneer Lovegood wil help, nie vir ons nie."

Hy maak soos sy voorstel en gee die Mantel vir haar sodat sy dit in haar kraletjiehandsak kan sit. Dan klop sy drie keer aan die dik swart deur wat met spykerknoppe versier is en 'n klopper in die vorm van 'n arend het.

Skaars tien sekondes gaan verby, dan vlieg die deur oop en daar staan Xenophilius Lovegood, kaalvoet en in wat soos 'n gevlekte nagkabaai lyk. Sy lang wit spookasemhare is vuil en onversorg. In vergelyking met nou was Xenophilius beslis swierig by Bill en Fleur se troue.

"Wat? Wat is dit? Wie is julle? Wat wil julle hê?" roep hy in 'n hoë, iesegrimmige stem uit. Hy kyk eers na Hermione, dan na Ron, en laastens na Harry, en dan val sy mond oop in 'n perfekte, komiese "O".

"Hallo, meneer Lovegood," sê Harry en hou sy hand uit. "Ek's Harry, Harry Potter."

Xenophilius neem nie Harry se hand nie, hoewel die oog wat nie skeel na sy neus toe trek nie, reguit na die litteken op Harry se voorkop kyk.

"Sal dit oukei wees as ons inkom?" vra Harry. "Daar is iets wat ons graag vir jou wil vra."

"Ek . . . ek is nie seker dis raadsaam nie," fluister Xenophilius. Hy sluk en kyk vinnig in die tuin rond. "Ietwat van 'n skok . . . my wêreld . . . Ek . . . ek's bevrees ek dink nie regtig ek behoort –"

"Dit sal nie lank vat nie," sê Harry, effens teleurgesteld oor hierdie minder-as-warm verwelkoming.

"Ek – og, nou goed dan. Kom in, gou. *Gou!*"

Hulle is skaars oor die drumpel of Xenophilius klap die deur agter hulle toe. Hulle staan in die eienaardigste kombuis wat Harry nog ooit gesien het. Die vertrek is 'n perfekte sirkel, sodat dit voel asof hulle in 'n reusepeperpot is. Alles is geboë om by die mure te pas: die stoof, die opwasbak en die kaste, en alles is vol blomme, insekte en voëls geverf in helder, primêre kleure. Harry dink hy herken Luna se styl: in so 'n geslote ruimte is die effek effens oorweldigend.

In die middel van die vloer is daar 'n smeedyster-wenteltrap wat na die boonste vlakke toe lei. Daar kom 'n geweldige gerammel en gekap van bo af; Harry wonder wat Luna aanvang.

"Julle moet maar boontoe kom," sê Xenophilius, wat nog steeds besonder ongemaklik lyk, en loop voor.

Die boonste vertrek lyk na 'n kombinasie van 'n sitkamer en werksplek en is daarom selfs nog meer rommelrig as die kombuis. Hoewel dit kleiner is, en koeëlrond, lyk die vertrek op 'n manier na die Vertrek van Vereistes daardie onvergeetlike keer toe dit getransformeer het tot 'n reusagtige doolhof wat eeue se versteekte voorwerpe bevat. Daar is stapels en stapels boeke en dokumente op elke moontlike oppervlak gepak. Delikaat gemaakte modelle van dierasies wat Harry nie herken nie, hang van die plafon af en klap hulle vlerke of kake.

Luna is nie hier nie: die ding wat so 'n geraas maak, is 'n houtvoorwerp vol tandwiele wat toweragtig draai. Dit lyk soos die bisarre samekoms van 'n werkbank en 'n stel ou rakke, maar ná 'n oomblik lei Harry af dit is 'n outydse drukpers vanweë die feit dat dit *Vitters* voortbring.

"Verskoon my," sê Xenophilius en hy loop na die masjien toe, haal 'n smerige tafeldoek uit onder 'n yslike klomp boeke en doku-

mente wat alles op die vloer val en gooi dit oor die drukpers; dit verdoof die harde gerammel en geraas ietwat. Dan draai hy na Harry.

"Hoekom is julle hier?"

Maar voor Harry kan praat, gee Hermione egter 'n geskokte gilletjie.

"Meneer Lovegood – wat's dit?"

Sy wys na 'n enorme grys spiraalhoring, amper soos 'n eenhoring s'n, wat teen die muur gemonteer is en 'n hele paar voet ver in die vertrek uitsteek.

"Dit is 'n Frommelhoring Snorklap se horing,' sê Xenophilius.

"Nee, dit is nie!" sê Hermione.

"Hermione," mompel Harry verleë, "dis nie nou die regte oomblik om –"

"Maar Harry, dis 'n Plofhoring! Dis 'n Klas B Verhandelbare Voorwerp en dis 'n ontsettend gevaarlike ding om in 'n huis te hê!"

"Hoe weet jy dis 'n Plofhoring?" vra Ron, wat so vinnig as wat die buitengewoon deurmekaar vertrek dit toelaat, van die horing af wegbeweeg.

"Daar's 'n beskrywing daarvan in *Fantasmagoriese Kreature en Waar om Hulle te Vind*! Meneer Lovegood, jy moet dadelik daarvan ontslae raak; weet jy nie dit kan by die geringste aanraking ontplof nie?"

"Die Frommelhoring Snorklap," sê Xenophilius afgemete met 'n hardkoppige uitdrukking op sy gesig, "is 'n skugter en hoogs toweragtige dierasie, en sy horing –"

"Meneer Lovegood, ek herken die gegroefde merke om die onderkant. Dis 'n Plofhoring en dis ongelooflik gevaarlik – ek weet nie waar jy dit gekry het nie –"

"Ek het dit gekoop," sê Xenophilius skoolmeesteragtig, "twee weke gelede, by 'n innemende jong towenaar wat geweet het van my belangstelling in die manjifieke Snorklap. 'n Kersverrassing vir my Luna. Nou ja," sê hy en draai na Harry, "waarom presies is jy hier, meneer Potter?"

"Ons het hulp nodig," sê Harry voor Hermione weer kan begin.

"A," sê Xenophilius. "Hulp. Hm." Sy normale oog beweeg weer na Harry se litteken toe. Hy lyk tegelyk vreesbevange en gehipnotiseer. "Ja. Die probleem is . . . om Harry Potter te help . . . is taamlik gevaarlik . . ."

"Is jy nie die een wat die hele tyd vir almal sê dis hulle plig om Harry te help nie?" sê Ron. "In daai tydskrif van jou?"

Xenophilius kyk om na die versteekte drukpers wat nog steeds onder die tafeldoek kletter en klap.

"E – ja, ek het daardie mening uitgespreek. Nogtans –"

"– moet al die ander mense dit doen, nie jy persoonlik nie?" sê Ron.

Xenophilius antwoord nie. Hy sluk aanhoudend en sy oë skiet heen en weer tussen hulle drie. Harry kry die indruk dat hy deur 'n pynlike innerlike worsteling gaan.

"Waar's Luna?" vra Hermione. "Kom ons kyk wat dink sy."

Xenophilius sluk swaar. Dit lyk of hy homself staal. Uiteindelik sê hy in 'n bewerige stem wat hulle moeilik bo die drukpers se geraas hoor: "Luna is onder by die riviertjie besig om Varswaterplimpies te vang. Sy . . . sy sal julle graag wil sien. Ek sal haar gaan roep en dan – ja, goed dan. Ek sal julle probeer help."

Hy verdwyn by die wenteltrap af en hulle hoor die voordeur oop- en toegaan. Hulle kyk na mekaar.

"Lafhartige ou vratgevreet," sê Ron. "Luna het tien keer meer moed as hy."

"Hy's waarskynlik bang oor wat met hulle sal gebeur as die Doodseters uitvind ek was hier," sê Harry.

"Wel, ek stem saam met Ron," sê Hermione. "Die aaklige ou tweegesig sê vir almal hulle moet jou help, maar probeer homself daaruit wurm. En bly om hemelswil weg van daardie horing af."

Harry loop na die venster aan die oorkant van die vertrek. Hy sien 'n riviertjie, 'n dun, glinsterende lint wat ver onder hulle aan die voet van die heuwel lê. Hulle is baie hoog op; 'n voël fladder verby die venster terwyl hy in die rigting van Die Konynenes kyk, wat nou onsigbaar agter nog 'n ry heuwels is. Ginny is daar anderkant iewers. Hulle is vandag nader aan mekaar as wat hulle nog was sedert Bill en Fleur se troue, maar hoe sal sy weet hy tuur nou na haar toe en dink aan haar? Hy moet seker bly wees daaroor; enigiemand met wie hy in kontak kom, verkeer in gevaar: Xenophilius se houding het dit duidelik gemaak.

Hy draai weg van die venster af en sien nog 'n vreemde voorwerp wat op die volgepakte geboë buffet staan: 'n borsbeeld uit klip van 'n pragtige maar somber heks met 'n bisarre hooftooisel op. Twee voorwerpe wat soos goue gehoorbuise lyk, krul van die kante af op. Twee klein glinsterende blou vlerkies is aan 'n leerband om haar kop vasgemaak, terwyl een van die oranje radyse aan 'n tweede band om haar voorkop vasgesteek is.

"Kyk hier," sê Harry.

"Oulik," sê Ron. "Kan nie glo hy't dit nie by die troue gedra nie."

Hulle hoor die voordeur toegaan en 'n oomblik later kom Xenophilius terug by die wenteltrap op en by die vertrek in. Daar is nou

waterstewels aan sy dun bene en hy dra 'n skinkbord met teekoppies wat nie bymekaar pas nie en 'n stomende teepot.

"A, jy het my gunstelinguitvindsel raakgesien," sê hy terwyl hy die skinkbord in Hermione se arms stop en by Harry langs die bronsbeeld aansluit. "Gemodelleer, heel gepas, na die kop van die pragtige Rowena Raweklou. *Uitermate vernuf is 'n onuitputlike skat!*"

Hy wys na die voorwerpe wat soos gehoorbuise lyk.

"Dit is Jigjors-opsuiers – om alle bronne van verwarring uit die denker se onmiddellike omgewing te verwyder. Hierdie," hy wys na die klein vlerkies, "is 'n Helikopterbesie se skroeflemme om 'n verhewe gemoedstemming teweeg te bring. En laastens," hy wys na die oranje radys, "die Lugskippruim, om die vermoë om die buitengewone te aanvaar, te verhoog."

Xenophilius beweeg terug na die skinkbord wat Hermione wankelrig op een van die oorvol sytafeltjies gebalanseer gekry het.

"Mag ek vir julle almal 'n aftreksel van Goerdiewortel aanbied?" vra Xenophilius. "Ons maak dit self." Terwyl hy die drankie begin inskink wat so dieppers soos beetsap is, voeg hy by: "Luna is onder by Benede Brug en sy is baie opgewonde dat julle hier is. Sy behoort nie te lank te wees nie; sy het al amper genoeg Plimpies gevang om vir ons almal sop te maak. Sit gerus en kry vir julle suiker.

"Nou ja," hy haal 'n stapel wankelrige dokumente van 'n leunstoel af en gaan sit met sy gestewelde bene gekruis, "hoe kan ek jou help, meneer Potter?"

"Wel," sê Harry en loer na Hermione wat aanmoedigend knik, "dis oor daardie simbool wat jy by Bill en Fleur se troue om jou nek gedra het, meneer Lovegood. Ons wonder wat dit beteken."

Xenophilius lig sy wenkbroue.

"Verwys jy nou na die teken van die Skatte van die Dood?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



THE TALE OF THE THREE BROTHERS

Harry turned to look at Ron and Hermione. Neither of them seemed to have understood what Xenophilius had said either.

"The Deathly Hallows?"

"That's right," said Xenophilius. "You haven't heard of them? I'm not surprised. Very, very few wizards believe. Witness that knuckleheaded young man at your brother's wedding," he nodded at Ron, "who attacked me for sporting the symbol of a well-known Dark wizard! Such ignorance. There is nothing Dark about the Hallows — at least, not in that crude sense. One simply uses the symbol to reveal oneself to other believers, in the hope that they might help one with the Quest."

He stirred several lumps of sugar into his Gurdyroot infusion and drank some.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry. “I still don’t really understand.”

To be polite, he took a sip from his cup too, and almost gagged: The stuff was quite disgusting, as though someone had liquidized bogey-flavored Every Flavor Beans.

“Well, you see, believers seek the Deathly Hallows,” said Xenophilius, smacking his lips in apparent appreciation of the Gurdyroot infusion.

“But what *are* the Deathly Hallows?” asked Hermione.

Xenophilius set aside his empty teacup.

“I assume that you are all familiar with ‘The Tale of the Three Brothers’?”

Harry said, “No,” but Ron and Hermione both said, “Yes.” Xenophilius nodded gravely.

“Well, well, Mr. Potter, the whole thing starts with ‘The Tale of the Three Brothers’ . . . I have a copy somewhere. . . .”

He glanced vaguely around the room, at the piles of parchment and books, but Hermione said, “I’ve got a copy, Mr. Lovegood, I’ve got it right here.”

And she pulled out *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* from the small, beaded bag.

“The original?” inquired Xenophilius sharply, and when she nodded, he said, “Well then, why don’t you read it aloud? Much the best way to make sure we all understand.”

“Er . . . all right,” said Hermione nervously. She opened the book, and Harry saw that the symbol they were investigating headed the top of the page as she gave a little cough, and began to read.

“‘There were once three brothers who were traveling along a

lonely, winding road at twilight —'"

"Midnight, our mum always told us," said Ron, who had stretched out, arms behind his head, to listen. Hermione shot him a look of annoyance.

"Sorry, I just think it's a bit spookier if it's midnight!" said Ron.

"Yeah, because we really need a bit more fear in our lives," said Harry before he could stop himself. Xenophilius did not seem to be paying much attention, but was staring out of the window at the sky. "Go on, Hermione."

"'*In time, the brothers reached a river too deep to wade through and too dangerous to swim across. However, these brothers were learned in the magical arts, and so they simply waved their wands and made a bridge appear across the treacherous water. They were halfway across it when they found their path blocked by a hooded figure.*

"'*And Death spoke to them —'"*

"Sorry," interjected Harry, "but *Death* spoke to them?"

"It's a fairy tale, Harry!"

"Right, sorry. Go on."

"'*And Death spoke to them. He was angry that he had been cheated out of three new victims, for travelers usually drowned in the river. But Death was cunning. He pretended to congratulate the three brothers upon their magic, and said that each had earned a prize for having been clever enough to evade him.*

"'*So the oldest brother, who was a combative man, asked for a wand more powerful than any in existence: a wand that must always win duels for its owner, a wand worthy of a wizard who had*

conquered Death! So Death crossed to an elder tree on the banks of the river, fashioned a wand from a branch that hung there, and gave it to the oldest brother.

"*'Then the second brother, who was an arrogant man, decided that he wanted to humiliate Death still further, and asked for the power to recall others from Death. So Death picked up a stone from the riverbank and gave it to the second brother, and told him that the stone would have the power to bring back the dead.*

"*'And then Death asked the third and youngest brother what he would like. The youngest brother was the humblest and also the wisest of the brothers, and he did not trust Death. So he asked for something that would enable him to go forth from that place without being followed by Death. And Death, most unwillingly, handed over his own Cloak of Invisibility.'*"

"Death's got an Invisibility Cloak?" Harry interrupted again.

"So he can sneak up on people," said Ron. "Sometimes he gets bored of running at them, flapping his arms and shrieking . . . sorry, Hermione."

"*'Then Death stood aside and allowed the three brothers to continue on their way, and they did so, talking with wonder of the adventure they had had, and admiring Death's gifts.*

"*'In due course the brothers separated, each for his own destination.*

"*'The first brother traveled on for a week or more, and reaching a distant village, sought out a fellow wizard with whom he had a quarrel. Naturally, with the Elder Wand as his weapon, he could not fail to win the duel that followed. Leaving his enemy dead upon*

the floor, the oldest brother proceeded to an inn, where he boasted loudly of the powerful wand he had snatched from Death himself, and of how it made him invincible.

"'*That very night, another wizard crept upon the oldest brother as he lay, wine-sodden, upon his bed. The thief took the wand and, for good measure, slit the oldest brother's throat.*

"'*And so Death took the first brother for his own.*

"'*Meanwhile, the second brother journeyed to his own home, where he lived alone. Here he took out the stone that had the power to recall the dead, and turned it thrice in his hand. To his amazement and his delight, the figure of the girl he had once hoped to marry, before her untimely death, appeared at once before him.*

"'*Yet she was sad and cold, separated from him as by a veil. Though she had returned to the mortal world, she did not truly belong there and suffered. Finally the second brother, driven mad with hopeless longing, killed himself so as truly to join her.*

"'*And so Death took the second brother for his own.*

"'*But though Death searched for the third brother for many years, he was never able to find him. It was only when he had attained a great age that the youngest brother finally took off the Cloak of Invisibility and gave it to his son. And then he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, equals, they departed this life.*'"

Hermione closed the book. It was a moment or two before Xenophilius seemed to realize that she had stopped reading, then he withdrew his gaze from the window and said, "Well, there you are."

"Sorry?" said Hermione, sounding confused.

“Those are the Deathly Hallows,” said Xenophilius.

He picked up a quill from a packed table at his elbow, and pulled a torn piece of parchment from between more books.

“The Elder Wand,” he said, and he drew a straight vertical line upon the parchment. “The Resurrection Stone,” he said, and he added a circle on top of the line. “The Cloak of Invisibility,” he finished, enclosing both line and circle in a triangle, to make the symbol that so intrigued Hermione. “Together,” he said, “the Deathly Hallows.”

“But there’s no mention of the words ‘Deathly Hallows’ in the story,” said Hermione.

“Well, of course not,” said Xenophilius, maddeningly smug. “That is a children’s tale, told to amuse rather than to instruct. Those of us who understand these matters, however, recognize that the ancient story refers to three objects, or Hallows, which, if united, will make the possessor master of Death.”

There was a short silence in which Xenophilius glanced out of the window. Already the sun was low in the sky.

“Luna ought to have enough Plimpies soon,” he said quietly.

“When you say ‘master of Death’ —” said Ron.

“Master,” said Xenophilius, waving an airy hand. “Conqueror. Vanquisher. Whichever term you prefer.”

“But then . . . do you mean . . .” said Hermione slowly, and Harry could tell that she was trying to keep any trace of skepticism out of her voice, “that you believe these objects — these Hallows — actually exist?”

Xenophilius raised his eyebrows again.

“Well, of course.”

“But,” said Hermione, and Harry could hear her restraint starting to crack, “Mr. Lovegood, how can you *possibly* believe — ?”

“Luna has told me all about you, young lady,” said Xenophilius. “You are, I gather, not unintelligent, but painfully limited. Narrow. Close-minded.”

“Perhaps you ought to try on the hat, Hermione,” said Ron, nodding toward the ludicrous headdress. His voice shook with the strain of not laughing.

“Mr. Lovegood,” Hermione began again. “We all know that there are such things as Invisibility Cloaks. They are rare, but they exist. But —”

“Ah, but the Third Hallow is a *true* Cloak of Invisibility, Miss Granger! I mean to say, it is not a traveling cloak imbued with a Disillusionment Charm, or carrying a Bedazzling Hex, or else woven from Demiguise hair, which will hide one initially but fade with the years until it turns opaque. We are talking about a cloak that really and truly renders the wearer completely invisible, and endures eternally, giving constant and impenetrable concealment, no matter what spells are cast at it. How many cloaks have you ever seen like *that,* Miss Granger?”

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, then closed it again, looking more confused than ever. She, Harry, and Ron glanced at one another, and Harry knew that they were all thinking the same thing. It so happened that a cloak exactly like the one Xenophilius had just described was in the room with them at that very moment.

“Exactly,” said Xenophilius, as if he had defeated them all in reasoned argument. “None of you have ever seen such a thing. The

possessor would be immeasurably rich, would he not?"

He glanced out of the window again. The sky was now tinged with the faintest trace of pink.

"All right," said Hermione, disconcerted. "Say the Cloak existed . . . what about the stone, Mr. Lovegood? The thing you call the Resurrection Stone?"

"What of it?"

"Well, how can that be real?"

"Prove that it is not," said Xenophilius.

Hermione looked outraged.

"But that's — I'm sorry, but that's completely ridiculous! How can I *possibly* prove it doesn't exist? Do you expect me to get hold of — of all the pebbles in the world and test them? I mean, you could claim that *anything's* real if the only basis for believing in it is that nobody's *proved* it doesn't exist!"

"Yes, you could," said Xenophilius. "I am glad to see that you are opening your mind a little."

"So the Elder Wand," said Harry quickly, before Hermione could retort, "you think that exists too?"

"Oh, well, in that case there is endless evidence," said Xenophilius. "The Elder Wand is the Hallow that is most easily traced, because of the way in which it passes from hand to hand."

"Which is what?" asked Harry.

"Which is that the possessor of the wand must capture it from its previous owner, if he is to be truly master of it," said Xenophilius. "Surely you have heard of the way the wand came to Egbert the Egregious, after his slaughter of Emeric the Evil? Of how Godelot

died in his own cellar after his son, Hereward, took the wand from him? Of the dreadful Loxias, who took the wand from Barnabas Deverill, whom he had killed? The bloody trail of the Elder Wand is splattered across the pages of Wizarding history."

Harry glanced at Hermione. She was frowning at Xenophilius, but she did not contradict him.

"So where do you think the Elder Wand is now?" asked Ron.

"Alas, who knows?" said Xenophilius, as he gazed out of the window. "Who knows where the Elder Wand lies hidden? The trail goes cold with Arcus and Livius. Who can say which of them really defeated Loxias, and which took the wand? And who can say who may have defeated them? History, alas, does not tell us."

There was a pause. Finally Hermione asked stiffly, "Mr. Lovegood, does the Peverell family have anything to do with the Deathly Hallows?"

Xenophilius looked taken aback as something shifted in Harry's memory, but he could not locate it. Peverell . . . he had heard that name before. . . .

"But you have been misleading me, young woman!" said Xenophilius, now sitting up much straighter in his chair and goggling at Hermione. "I thought you were new to the Hallows Quest! Many of us Questers believe that the Peverells have everything — *everything!* — to do with the Hallows!"

"Who are the Peverells?" asked Ron.

"That was the name on the grave with the mark on it, in Godric's Hollow," said Hermione, still watching Xenophilius. "Ignotus Peverell."

"Exactly!" said Xenophilius, his forefinger raised pedantically. "The sign of the Deathly Hallows on Ignotus's grave is conclusive proof!"

"Of what?" asked Ron.

"Why, that the three brothers in the story were actually the three Peverell brothers, Antioch, Cadmus, and Ignotus! That they were the original owners of the Hallows!"

With another glance at the window he got to his feet, picked up the tray, and headed for the spiral staircase.

"You will stay for dinner?" he called, as he vanished downstairs again. "Everybody always requests our recipe for Freshwater Plimpy soup."

"Probably to show the Poisoning Department at St. Mungo's," said Ron under his breath.

Harry waited until they could hear Xenophilius moving about in the kitchen downstairs before speaking.

"What do you think?" he asked Hermione.

"Oh, Harry," she said wearily, "it's a pile of utter rubbish. This can't be what the sign really means. This must just be his weird take on it. What a waste of time."

"I s'pose this *is* the man who brought us Crumple-Horned Snorkacks," said Ron.

"You don't believe it either?" Harry asked him.

"Nah, that story's just one of those things you tell kids to teach them lessons, isn't it? 'Don't go looking for trouble, don't pick fights, don't go messing around with stuff that's best left alone! Just keep your head down, mind your own business, and you'll be okay.' Come

to think of it," Ron added, "maybe that story's why elder wands are supposed to be unlucky."

"What are you talking about?"

"One of those superstitions, isn't it? 'May-born witches will marry Muggles.' 'Jinx by twilight, undone by midnight.' 'Wand of elder, never prosper.' You must've heard them. My mum's full of them."

"Harry and I were raised by Muggles," Hermione reminded him. "We were taught different superstitions." She sighed deeply as a rather pungent smell drifted up from the kitchen. The one good thing about her exasperation with Xenophilius was that it seemed to have made her forget that she was annoyed at Ron. "I think you're right," she told him. "It's just a morality tale, it's obvious which gift is best, which one you'd choose —"

The three of them spoke at the same time; Hermione said, "the Cloak," Ron said, "the wand," and Harry said, "the stone."

They looked at each other, half surprised, half amused.

"You're *supposed* to say the Cloak," Ron told Hermione, "but you wouldn't need to be invisible if you had the wand. *An unbeatable wand,* Hermione, come on!"

"We've already got an Invisibility Cloak," said Harry.

"And it's helped us rather a lot, in case you hadn't noticed!" said Hermione. "Whereas the wand would be bound to attract trouble —"

"Only if you shouted about it," argued Ron. "Only if you were prat enough to go dancing around, waving it over your head, and singing, 'I've got an unbeatable wand, come and have a go if you think you're hard enough.' As long as you kept your trap shut —"

"Yes, but *could* you keep your trap shut?" said Hermione, looking

skeptical. “You know, the only true thing he said to us was that there have been stories about extra-powerful wands for hundreds of years.”

“There have?” asked Harry.

Hermione looked exasperated: The expression was so endearingly familiar that Harry and Ron grinned at each other.

“The Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny, they crop up under different names through the centuries, usually in the possession of some Dark wizard who’s boasting about them. Professor Binns mentioned some of them, but — oh, it’s all nonsense. Wands are only as powerful as the wizards who use them. Some wizards just like to boast that theirs are bigger and better than other people’s.”

“But how do you know,” said Harry, “that those wands — the Deathstick and the Wand of Destiny — aren’t the same wand, surfacing over the centuries under different names?”

“What, and they’re all really the Elder Wand, made by Death?” said Ron.

Harry laughed: The strange idea that had occurred to him was, after all, ridiculous. His wand, he reminded himself, had been of holly, not elder, and it had been made by Ollivander, whatever it had done that night Voldemort had pursued him across the skies. And if it had been unbeatable, how could it have been broken?

“So why would you take the stone?” Ron asked him.

“Well, if you could bring people back, we could have Sirius . . . Mad-Eye . . . Dumbledore . . . my parents. . . .”

Neither Ron nor Hermione smiled.

“But according to Beedle the Bard, they wouldn’t want to come

back, would they?” said Harry, thinking about the tale they had just heard. “I don’t suppose there have been loads of other stories about a stone that can raise the dead, have there?” he asked Hermione.

“No,” she replied sadly. “I don’t think anyone except Mr. Lovegood could kid themselves that’s possible. Beedle probably took the idea from the Sorcerer’s Stone; you know, instead of a stone to make you immortal, a stone to reverse death.”

The smell from the kitchen was getting stronger: It was something like burning underpants. Harry wondered whether it would be possible to eat enough of whatever Xenophilius was cooking to spare his feelings.

“What about the Cloak, though?” said Ron slowly. “Don’t you realize, he’s right? I’ve got so used to Harry’s Cloak and how good it is, I never stopped to think. I’ve never heard of one like Harry’s. It’s infallible. We’ve never been spotted under it —”

“Of course not — we’re invisible when we’re under it, Ron!”

“But all the stuff he said about other cloaks, and they’re not exactly ten a Knut, you know, is true! It’s never occurred to me before, but I’ve heard stuff about charms wearing off cloaks when they get old, or them being ripped apart by spells so they’ve got holes in. Harry’s was owned by his dad, so it’s not exactly new, is it, but it’s just . . . perfect!”

“Yes, all right, but Ron, the *stone* . . .”

As they argued in whispers, Harry moved around the room, only half listening. Reaching the spiral stair, he raised his eyes absently to the next level and was distracted at once. His own face was looking back at him from the ceiling of the room above.

After a moment's bewilderment, he realized that it was not a mirror, but a painting. Curious, he began to climb the stairs.

"Harry, what are you doing? I don't think you should look around when he's not here!"

But Harry had already reached the next level.

Luna had decorated her bedroom ceiling with five beautifully painted faces: Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville. They were not moving as the portraits at Hogwarts moved, but there was a certain magic about them all the same: Harry thought they breathed. What appeared to be fine golden chains wove around the pictures, linking them together, but after examining them for a minute or so, Harry realized that the chains were actually one word, repeated a thousand times in golden ink: *friends* . . . *friends* . . . *friends* . . .

Harry felt a great rush of affection for Luna. He looked around the room. There was a large photograph beside the bed, of a young Luna and a woman who looked very like her. They were hugging. Luna looked rather better-groomed in this picture than Harry had ever seen her in life. The picture was dusty. This struck Harry as slightly odd. He stared around.

Something was wrong. The pale blue carpet was also thick with dust. There were no clothes in the wardrobe, whose doors stood ajar. The bed had a cold, unfriendly look, as though it had not been slept in for weeks. A single cobweb stretched over the nearest window, across a bloodred sky.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked as Harry descended the staircase, but before he could respond, Xenophilius reached the top of the stairs from the kitchen, now holding a tray laden with bowls.

"Mr. Lovegood," said Harry. "Where's Luna?"

"Excuse me?"

"Where's Luna?"

Xenophilius halted on the top step.

"I — I've already told you. She is down at Bottom Bridge, fishing for Plimpies."

"So why have you only laid that tray for four?"

Xenophilius tried to speak, but no sound came out. The only noise was the continued chugging of the printing press, and a slight rattle from the tray as Xenophilius's hands shook.

"I don't think Luna's been here for weeks," said Harry. "Her clothes are gone, her bed hasn't been slept in. Where is she? And why do you keep looking out of the window?"

Xenophilius dropped the tray: The bowls bounced and smashed. Harry, Ron, and Hermione drew their wands: Xenophilius froze, his hand about to enter his pocket. At that moment the printing press gave a huge bang and numerous *Quibbler*s came streaming across the floor from underneath the tablecloth; the press fell silent at last.

Hermione stooped down and picked up one of the magazines, her wand still pointing at Mr. Lovegood.

"Harry, look at this."

He strode over to her as quickly as he could through all the clutter. The front of *The Quibbler* carried his own picture, emblazoned with the words UNDESIRABLE NUMBER ONE and captioned with the reward money.

"*The Quibbler*'s going for a new angle, then?" Harry asked coldly, his mind working very fast. "Is that what you were doing when you

went into the garden, Mr. Lovegood? Sending an owl to the Ministry?"

Xenophilius licked his lips.

"They took my Luna," he whispered. "Because of what I've been writing. They took my Luna and I don't know where she is, what they've done to her. But they might give her back to me if I — if I —"

"Hand over Harry?" Hermione finished for him.

"No deal," said Ron flatly. "Get out of the way, we're leaving."

Xenophilius looked ghastly, a century old, his lips drawn back into a dreadful leer.

"They will be here at any moment. I must save Luna. I cannot lose Luna. You must not leave."

He spread his arms in front of the staircase, and Harry had a sudden vision of his mother doing the same thing in front of his crib.

"Don't make us hurt you," Harry said. "Get out of the way, Mr. Lovegood."

"HARRY!" Hermione screamed.

Figures on broomsticks were flying past the windows. As the three of them looked away from him, Xenophilius drew his wand. Harry realized their mistake just in time: He launched himself sideways, shoving Ron and Hermione out of harm's way as Xenophilius's Stunning Spell soared across the room and hit the Erumpent horn.

There was a colossal explosion. The sound of it seemed to blow the room apart: Fragments of wood and paper and rubble flew in all directions, along with an impenetrable cloud of thick white dust. Harry flew through the air, then crashed to the floor, unable to see as debris rained upon him, his arms over his head. He heard Hermione's

scream, Ron's yell, and a series of sickening metallic thuds, which told him that Xenophilius had been blasted off his feet and fallen backward down the spiral stairs.

Half buried in rubble, Harry tried to raise himself: He could barely breathe or see for dust. Half of the ceiling had fallen in, and the end of Luna's bed was hanging through the hole. The bust of Rowena Ravenclaw lay beside him with half its face missing, fragments of torn parchment were floating through the air, and most of the printing press lay on its side, blocking the top of the staircase to the kitchen. Then another white shape moved close by, and Hermione, coated in dust like a second statue, pressed her finger to her lips.

The door downstairs crashed open.

"Didn't I tell you there was no need to hurry, Travers?" said a rough voice. "Didn't I tell you this nutter was just raving as usual?"

There was a bang and a scream of pain from Xenophilius.

"No . . . no . . . upstairs . . . Potter!"

"I told you last week, Lovegood, we weren't coming back for anything less than some solid information! Remember last week? When you wanted to swap your daughter for that stupid bleeding headdress? And the week before" — another bang, another squeal — "when you thought we'd give her back if you offered us proof there are Crumple" — *bang* — "Headed" — *bang* — "Snorkacks?"

"No — no — I beg you!" sobbed Xenophilius. "It really is Potter! Really!"

"And now it turns out you only called us here to try and blow us up!" roared the Death Eater, and there was a volley of bangs

interspersed with squeals of agony from Xenophilius.

"The place looks like it's about to fall in, Selwyn," said a cool second voice, echoing up the mangled staircase. "The stairs are completely blocked. Could try clearing it? Might bring the place down."

"You lying piece of filth," shouted the wizard named Selwyn. "You've never seen Potter in your life, have you? Thought you'd lure us here to kill us, did you? And you think you'll get your girl back like this?"

"I swear . . . I swear . . . Potter's upstairs!"

"Homenum revelio," said the voice at the foot of the stairs.

Harry heard Hermione gasp, and he had the odd sensation that something was swooping low over him, immersing his body in its shadow.

"There's someone up there all right, Selwyn," said the second man sharply.

"It's Potter, I tell you, it's Potter!" sobbed Xenophilius. "Please . . . please . . . give me Luna, just let me have Luna. . . ."

"You can have your little girl, Lovegood," said Selwyn, "if you get up those stairs and bring me down Harry Potter. But if this is a plot, if it's a trick, if you've got an accomplice waiting up there to ambush us, we'll see if we can spare a bit of your daughter for you to bury."

Xenophilius gave a wail of fear and despair. There were scurryings and scrapings: Xenophilius was trying to get through the debris on the stairs.

"Come on," Harry whispered, "we've got to get out of here."

He started to dig himself out under cover of all the noise

Xenophilius was making on the staircase. Ron was buried deepest: Harry and Hermione climbed, as quietly as they could, over all the wreckage to where he lay, trying to prise a heavy chest of drawers off his legs. While Xenophilius's banging and scraping drew nearer and nearer, Hermione managed to free Ron with the use of a Hover Charm.

"All right," breathed Hermione, as the broken printing press blocking the top of the stairs began to tremble; Xenophilius was feet away from them. She was still white with dust. "Do you trust me, Harry?"

Harry nodded.

"Okay then," Hermione whispered, "give me the Invisibility Cloak. Ron, you're going to put it on."

"Me? But Harry —"

"*Please, Ron!* Harry, hold on tight to my hand, Ron, grab my shoulder."

Harry held out his left hand. Ron vanished beneath the Cloak. The printing press blocking the stairs was vibrating: Xenophilius was trying to shift it using a Hover Charm. Harry did not know what Hermione was waiting for.

"Hold tight," she whispered. "Hold tight . . . any second . . ."

Xenophilius's paper-white face appeared over the top of the sideboard.

"Obliviate!" cried Hermione, pointing her wand first into his face, then at the floor beneath them. *"Deprimo!"*

She had blasted a hole in the sitting room floor. They fell like boulders, Harry still holding onto her hand for dear life; there was a

scream from below, and he glimpsed two men trying to get out of the way as vast quantities of rubble and broken furniture rained all around them from the shattered ceiling. Hermione twisted in midair and the thundering of the collapsing house rang in Harry's ears as she dragged him once more into darkness.

HOOFSTUK EEN-EN-TWINTIG

Die Verhaal van die Drie Broers

Harry kyk na Ron en Hermione. Hulle verstaan blykbaar ook nie wat Xenophilius gesê het nie.

"Die Skatte van die Dood?"

"Dis reg," sê Xenophilius. "Het julle nog nie daarvan gehoor nie? Dit verbaas my nie. Baie, baie min towenaars glo. 'n Bewys daarvan was daardie pampoenkop van 'n jong man by jou broer se troue," knik hy vir Ron, "wat my aangeval het omdat ek 'n bekende Donker towenaar se simbool vertoon! Sulke onkunde. Daar is niks Donkers aan die Skatte nie – ten minste nie in daardie kru sin nie. 'n Mens gebruik die simbool eenvoudig om jouself aan ander gelowiges te openbaar, in die hoop dat hulle jou met die Soektog sal help."

Hy roer verskeie klontjies suiker by sy Goerdiewortel-aftreksel in en drink 'n mond vol.

"Ekskuus," sê Harry, "ek verstaan nie eintlik nie."

Om beleefd te wees, neem hy ook 'n slukkie uit sy koppie en word amper naar: die goed is walglik, dis asof iemand snolliegegeurde Allegeurtjieboontjies versap het.

"Wel, sien jy, gelowiges is op soek na die Skatte van die Dood," sê Xenophilius en klap sy lippe, blykbaar omdat hy die aftreksel van Goerdiewortel so geniet.

"Maar wat is die Skatte van die Dood?" vra Hermione.

Xenophilius sit sy leë teekoppie eenkant neer.

"Ek neem aan julle ken almal 'Die Verhaal van die Drie Broers'?"

Harry sê: "Nee," maar Ron en Hermione sê albei: "Ja."

Xenophilius knik gewigtig.

"Wel, wel, meneer Potter, die hele ding begin met 'Die Verhaal van die Drie Broers' . . . Ek het 'n eksemplaar iewers . . ."

Hy kyk verstrooid deur die vertrek na die stapels perkament en boeke, maar Hermione sê: "Ek het 'n eksemplaar, meneer Lovegood, ek het dit hier by my."

En sy haal *Die Verhale van Beedle die Skrywer* uit die klein kraletjiehandsak.

"Die oorspronklike een?" vra Xenophilius skerp en toe sy knik, sê hy: "Wel, hoekom lees jy dit nie hardop vir ons nie? Dis die beste manier om seker te maak ons almal verstaan dit."

"E . . . goed," sê Hermione senuweeagtig. Sy maak die boek oop en Harry sien die simbool waarna hulle ondersoek instel heel bo-aan die bladsy terwyl sy sag kug en dan begin lees.

"'*Daar was eenkeer drie broers wat teen skemer op 'n eensame, winderige pad op reis was –*' "

"My ma het altyd vir ons gesê dit was middernag," sê Ron, wat hom uitgestrek het en nou met sy arms agter sy kop luister. Hermione kyk geïrriteerd in sy rigting.

'Skuus, ek dink net dis 'n bietjie meer spokerig as dit middernag is!" sê Ron.

"Ja, want ons het regtig 'n bietjie meer vrees in ons lewe nodig," sê Harry voor hy homself kan keer. Xenophilius gee blykbaar nie veel aandag nie; hy staar by die venster uit na die lug toe. "Gaan aan, Hermione."

"'*Ná 'n ruk kom die broers by 'n rivier wat te diep is om deur te loop en te gevaarlik om oor te swem. Maar hierdie broers was in die towerkuns opgelei en daarom swaai hulle net eenvoudig hul towerstawwe en laat 'n brug oor die verraderlike water verskyn. Halfpad oor word hul pad egter deur 'n figuur in 'n mantelkap versper.*

"'*En toe praat die Dood met hulle –*'"

"Ekskuus," onderbreek Harry haar, "maar het die *Dood* met hulle gepraat?"

"Dis 'n feëverhaal, Harry!"

"Reg, ja, ekskuus. Gaan aan."

"'*En toe praat die Dood met hulle. Hy was kwaad omdat hy van drie nuwe slagoffers beroof is, want reisigers het gewoonlik in die rivier verdrink. Maar die Dood was uitgeslape. Hy wens die drie broers kwansuis geluk met hul towerkrag en sê elkeen verdien 'n prys omdat hulle slim genoeg was om hom te ontglip.*

"'*So die oudste broer, wat 'n veglustige man was, vra toe 'n towerstaf wat magtiger is as enige ander een wat bestaan: 'n towerstaf wat altyd 'n tweegeveg in sy eienaar se guns sal beklink, 'n towerstaf wat dit werd is om aan 'n man te behoort wat die Dood oorwin het! Die Dood steek toe die rivier oor na 'n vlierboom op die oewer en maak 'n towerstaf uit een van die boom se takke en gee dit vir die oudste broer.*

"'*Toe besluit die tweede broer, wat 'n arrogante man was, om die Dood nog verder te verneder en vra die mag om ander uit die Dood terug te roep. So, toe tel die Dood 'n steen op die rivier se wal op, gee dit vir die tweede broer, en sê vir hom daardie steen sal die mag hê om dooies terug te bring.*

"'En toe vra die Dood vir die derde en jongste broer wat hy wil hê. Die jongste broer was die nederigste en ook die wysste van die drie broers, en hy het die Dood nie vertrou nie. So, toe vra hy iets wat hom in staat sal stel om daarvandaan weg te kom sonder dat die Dood hom kan volg. En die Dood gee toe baie onwillig vir hom sy eie Onsigbaarheidsmantel.'"

"Die Dood het 'n Onsigbaarheidsmantel?" val Harry haar weer in die rede.

"Sodat hy mense kan bekruip," sê Ron. "Hy raak partykeer verveeld om al skreeuende met waaiende arms na hulle toe te hol . . . Ekskuus, Hermione."

"'Toe staan die Dood opsy en laat die drie broers hul reis voortsit, en hulle maak so terwyl hulle verwonderd gesels oor die avontuur wat hulle beleef het en die Dood se geskenke bewonder.

"'Mettertyd is die broers uitmekaar, elkeen van hulle op pad na sy eie bestemming.

"'Die eerste broer het nog 'n week of langer verder gereis en kom toe by 'n afgeleë dorpie waar hy 'n medetowenaar gaan opsoek en met hom rusie maak. In die daaropvolgende tweegeveg het hy die Vlierstaf natuurlik as sy wapen gebruik en maklik gewen. Die oudste broer los sy vyand dood op die grond, stap by 'n herberg in en spog kliphard oor die magtige towerstaf wat hy by die Dood self afgerokkel het en hoe onoorwinlik dit hom maak.

"'Daardie selfde nag bekruip 'n ander towenaar die oudste broer terwyl hy papdronk op sy bed lê. Die dief vat die towerstaf en sny op die koop toe die oudste broer se keel af.

"'En so het die Dood die eerste broer vir homself ingepalm.

"'Intussen het die tweede broer verder gereis tot by sy huis, waar hy alleen gewoon het. Hier het hy die steen wat die mag het om dooies terug te roep, uitgehaal en dit drie keer in sy hand omgedraai. Tot sy verstomming en blydskap verskyn die meisie met wie hy wou trou voor sy so ontydig dood is dadelik voor hom.

"'Maar sy was treurig en koud en iets soos 'n sluier het haar van hom af weggehou. Al het sy na die sterflike wêreld teruggekeer, het sy nie werklik hier gehoort nie en baie swaargekry. Uiteindelik het sy wanhopige verlange die tweede broer tot waansin gedryf en hy het homself doodgemaak sodat hy by haar kon aansluit.

"'En so het die Dood die tweede broer vir homself ingepalm.

"'Maar al het die Dood baie jare lank na die derde broer gesoek, kon hy hom nooit kry nie. Eers toe hy stokoud was, het die jongste broer uiteindelik die Onsigbaarheidsmantel afgehaal en dit vir sy seun gegee. En toe groet hy die Dood soos 'n ou vriend en gaan met genoeë saam met hom en hulle het hierdie lewe as gelykes verlaat.'"

Hermione maak die boek toe. Dit neem 'n oomblik of twee voor dit lyk of Xenophilius agterkom sy het opgehou lees, dan kyk hy van die venster af weg en sê: "Wel, daar het julle dit."

"Ekskuus?" sê Hermione en klink verward.

"Dit is die Skatte van die Dood daardie," sê Xenophilius.

Hy tel 'n veerpen van die volgepakte tafel by sy elmboog op en trek 'n geskeurde stuk perkament tussen 'n stapel boeke uit.

"Die Vlierstaf," sê hy en teken 'n reguit vertikale streep op die perkament. "Die Opstandingsteen," sê hy en voeg 'n sirkel bo-oor die streep by. "Die Onsigbaarheidsmantel," sluit hy af en omhul die streep sowel as die sirkel met 'n driehoek ten einde die simbool te vorm wat Hermione so fassineer. "Saam," sê hy, "die Skatte van die Dood."

"Maar die woorde 'die Skatte van die Dood' word nêrens in die storie genoem nie," sê Hermione.

"Wel, natuurlik nie," sê Xenophilius, onuithoudbaar selfvoldaan. "Dis 'n kinderverhaal wat vertel word om te amuseer, eerder as om te onderrig. Maar diegene van ons met begrip vir dergelike dinge besef daardie oeroue storie verwys na drie voorwerpe, of Skatte, wat wanneer hulle verenig word, die eienaar meester van die Dood sal maak."

Daar is 'n kort stilte waarin Xenophilius by die venster uitkyk. Die son hang reeds laag in die lug.

"Luna behoort binnekort genoeg Plimpies te hê," sê hy sag.

"As jy sê 'meester van die Dood' –" begin Ron vra.

"Meester," sê Xenophilius en waai sy hand nonchalant in die lug. Veroweraar. Oorwinnaar. Watter term jy ook al verkies."

"Maar dan . . . bedoel jy . . ." sê Hermione stadig en Harry weet sy probeer enige sweempie van twyfel uit haar stem hou, "jy glo daardie voorwerpe – daardie Skatte – bestaan werklik?"

Xenophilius lig weer sy wenkbroue.

"Wel, natuurlik."

"Maar," sê Hermione en Harry hoor 'n krakie in haar selfbeheersing, "meneer Lovegood, hoe kan jy *enigsins* glo –?"

"Luna het my alles van jou vertel, jonge dame," sê Xenophilius. "Ek lei af jy is nie onintelligent nie, maar pynlik beperk. Bekrompe. Toekop."

"Miskien moet jy daai hoed probeer opsit, Hermione," sê Ron en knik in die rigting van die belaglike hooftooisel. Sy stem bewe van inspanning om nie te lag nie.

"Meneer Lovegood," begin Hermione weer, "ons weet almal daar is sulke goed soos Onsigbaarheidsmantels. Hulle is seldsaam, hulle bestaan. Maar –"

"A, maar die Derde Skat is 'n *ware* mantel van onsigbaarheid, juffrou Granger! Ek bedoel, dit is nie 'n reismantel wat betower is met 'n Ontgogelingstowerspreuk of 'n Verblindingspaljas, of anders van Demi-vermomhare geweef is nie; dis alles dinge wat 'n mens aanvanklik sal versteek, maar oor die jare sal vervaag tot dit deursigtig word. Ons praat hier van 'n mantel wat die een wat dit dra waarlikwaar totaal onsigbaar maak en vir ewig sal hou, en konstante en ondeurdringbare verborgenheid sal verskaf, ongeag watter towerspreuke daaroor uitgespreek word. Hoeveel *sulke* mantels het jy al gesien, juffrou Granger?"

Hermione maak haar mond oop om te antwoord en dan weer toe; sy lyk meer verward as ooit. Sy, Harry en Ron loer na mekaar, en Harry weet hulle dink almal aan dieselfde ding. 'n Mantel presies soos die een wat Xenophilius so pas beskryf het, is toevallig op hierdie einste oomblik saam met hulle in die vertrek.

"Presies," sê Xenophilius asof hy hulle almal met 'n beredeneerde argument koudgesit het. "Nie een van julle het al ooit so iets gesien nie. Die eienaar sal onmeetbaar ryk wees, of hoe?"

Hy kyk weer by die venster uit. Daar is nou net 'n effense tikkie pienk in die lug.

"Nou goed," sê Hermione onthuts. "Gestel die Mantel bestaan . . . Wat van die steen, meneer Lovegood? Die ding wat jy die Opstandingsteen noem?"

"Wat daarvan?"

"Wel, hoe kan daar regtig so iets bestaan?"

"Bewys dit bestaan nie," sê Xenophilius.

Hermione lyk verontwaardig.

"Maar dis – ek's jammer, maar dis totaal belaglik! Ek kan *onmoontlik* bewys dit bestaan nie! Verwag jy ek moet al die – al die stene op aarde in die hande kry en hulle toets? Ek bedoel, 'n mens kan beweer *enigiets* bestaan as jy dit doen bloot op grond daarvan dat niemand *bewys* het dat dit nie bestaan nie!"

"Ja, jy kan," sê Xenophilius. "Ek is bly om te sien jy maak jou kop effens oop."

"En die Vlierstaf?" vra Harry vinnig voor Hermione kan terugkap. "Dink jy dit bestaan ook?"

"O wel, in daardie geval is daar eindelose bewyse," sê Xenophilius. "Die Vlierstaf is die Skat wat die maklikste is om op te spoor, want dit word van hand tot hand aangegee."

"Hoe werk dit?" vra Harry.

"Die towerstaf se eienaar moet dit van die vorige eienaar verower voor hy werklik die towerstaf se meester kan wees," sê Xenophilius.

"Julle het tog seker al gehoor hoe die towerstaf Egbert die opperste Skurk s'n geword het nadat hy Emric die Bose van kant gemaak het? Of hoe Godelot in sy eie kelder dood is nadat sy seun, Hereward, die towerstaf by hom afgevat het? Of van Liederlike Loxias wat Barnabus Deverill doodgemaak en die towerstaf by hom afgeneem het? Die Vlierstaf se bloedspoor loop regdeur ons towergeskiedenis se bladsye."

Harry loer na Hermione. Sy staar Xenophilius fronsend aan, maar sy weerspreek hom nie.

"So waar dink jy is die Vlierstaf nou?" vra Ron.

"Helaas, wie weet?" sê Xenophilius terwyl hy by die venster uittuur. "Wie weet waar lê die Vlierstaf versteek? Die spoor word koud by Arcus en Livius. Wie kan sê wie van hulle het Loxias werklik verslaan, en wie het die towerstaf gevat? En wie kan sê wie het hulle dalk verslaan? Die geskiedenis sê helaas nie vir ons nie."

Daar is 'n pouse. Uiteindelik vra Hermione stywerig: "Meneer Lovegood, het die Peverell-familie enigiets met die Skatte van die Dood te doen?"

Xenophilius lyk oorbluf terwyl daar iets in Harry se geheue roer, maar hy is nie seker wat nie. Peverell . . . Hy het daardie van al voorheen gehoor . . .

"Maar jy het my mos mislei, jonge dame!" sê Xenophilius, wat nou baie regopper in sy stoel sit en Hermione aangaap. "Ek dog jy's 'n nuweling tot die Soektog na die Skatte! Baie van ons Soekers glo die Peverells het alles – *alles!* – met die Skatte te make!"

"Wie is die Peverells?" vra Ron.

"Dit is die van op die graf met die simbool op, in Godric's Hollow," sê Hermione terwyl sy Xenophilius dophou. "Ignotus Peverell."

"Presies!" sê Xenophilius met sy voorvinger pedanties gelig. "Die Skatte van die Dood se simbool op Ignotus se graf is onweerlegbare bewys!"

"Waarvan?" vra Ron.

"Wel, dat die drie broers in die storie inderdaad die drie Peverellbroers was: Antioch, Cadmus en Ignotus! Dat hulle die Skatte se oorspronklike eienaars was!"

Met nog 'n kyk na die venster toe kom hy op die been, tel die skinkbord op en mik na die wenteltrap.

"Ek neem aan julle bly vir aandete?" roep hy terwyl hy weer af ondertoe verdwyn. "Almal vra altyd ons resep vir Varswater-plimpiesop."

"Seker om dit vir Sint Mungo se Gifafdeling te wys," mompel Ron binnensmonds.

Harry wag tot hulle Xenophilius onder in die kombuis hoor rondbeweeg voor hy praat.

"Wat dink jy?" vra hy vir Hermione.

"O, Harry," sê sy uitgeput, "dis louter onsin. Dit kan nie wees wat die teken regtig beteken nie. Dit moet net sy vreemde siening van die saak wees. Ons mors ons tyd."

"Ek veronderstel dit *is* die man wat vir ons Frommelhoring Snorklappe gegee het," sê Ron.

"Glo jy dit ook nie?" vra Harry.

"Nee, daardie storie's net een van daai dinge wat jy vir kinders vertel om hulle 'n lessie te leer. 'Moenie moeilikheid soek nie, moenie rusie soek nie, moenie sukkel met goed wat jy liewer moet uitlos nie! Hou jou kop net laag, bepaal jou by jou eie sake en jy sal oukei wees.' Noudat ek daaraan dink," voeg Ron by, "miskien is dit oor daai storie dat mense dink 'n vliertowerstaf is ongelukkig."

"Waarvan praat jy?"

"Bygelowe soos 'Hekse gebore in Mei gaan Moggelmans kry,' ''n Paljas teen skemeruur sal net tot middernag duur,' en ''n Towerstaf van vlier laat teëspoed seëvier'. Julle moes daai sêgoed al gehoor het. My ma gebruik dit knaend."

"Ek en Harry is deur Moggels grootgemaak," herinner Hermione hom, "dus het ons van ander bygelowe geleer." Sy sug diep terwyl 'n taamlike skerp reuk van die kombuis af opwarrel. Die een goeie ding van haar ergernis met Xenophilius is dat dit lyk of sy vergeet het van haar woede vir Ron. "Ek dink jy's reg," sê sy vir hom. "Dis net 'n sedelessie; dis duidelik watter geskenk die beste is, watter een 'n mens behoort te kies –"

Die drie praat gelyktydig. Hermione sê: "Die mantel," Ron sê: "Die towerstaf," en Harry sê: "Die steen."

Hulle kyk na mekaar, half verras, half geamuseerd.

"Jy's *veronderstel* om die Mantel te sê," sê Ron vir Hermione, "maar jy sal nie onsigbaar hoef te wees as jy die towerstaf het nie. *'n Onoorwinlike towerstaf*, Hermione, komaan!"

"Ons het reeds 'n Onsigbaarheidsmantel," sê Harry.

"En dit het ons al baie gehelp, ingeval julle dit nie agtergekom het nie!" sê Hermione. "Terwyl die towerstaf definitief net moeilikheid sal lok –"

"– net as jy dit vir almal uitblaker," redeneer Ron. "Net as jy simpel genoeg is om rond te dans en dit bo jou kop te waai en te sing: 'Ek het 'n onoorwinlike towerstaf, kom vat my aan as jy dink jy's goed genoeg.' Solank jy jou mond hou –"

"Ja, maar *kan* jy jou mond hou?" vra Hermione en lyk skepties.

"Weet julle, die enigste ding wat hy vir ons gesê het wat waar is, is dat daar al honderde jare lank stories oor ekstra magtige towerstawwe is."

"Was daar?" vra Harry.

Hermione lyk uitgeput: die uitdrukking op haar gesig lui soveel klokkies dat Harry en Ron vir mekaar grinnik.

"Die Doodstok, die Towerstaf van die Noodlot, hulle duik deur die eeue onder verskillende name op, gewoonlik in die besit van een of ander Donker towenaar wat daarmee spog. Professor Binns het party van hulle genoem, maar – og, dis alles nonsens. Towerstawwe is net so magtig soos die towenaars wat hulle gebruik. Party towenaars hou net daarvan om te spog dat hulle s'n groter en beter as ander mense s'n is."

"Maar hoe weet jy," sê Harry, "daardie towerstawwe – die Doodstok en die Towerstaf van die Noodlot – is nie dieselfde towerstaf wat deur die eeue heen onder verskillende name opduik nie?"

"Wat, en hulle's almal eintlik die Vlierstaf wat deur die Dood gemaak is?" sê Ron.

Harry lag: die vreemde gedagte wat by hom opgekom het, is per slot van sake belaglik. Sy towerstaf, herinner hy homself, was van steekpalmhout, nie vlierhout nie, en Ollivander het dit gemaak, wat dit ook al gedoen het die nag toe Voldemort hom deur die uitspansel agtervolg het. En as dit onoorwinlik was, hoe kon dit gebreek het?

"So, hoekom sal jy die steen vat?" vra Ron vir hom.

"Wel, as jy mense kan terugbring, kry ons vir Sirius . . . Maloog . . . Dumbledore . . . my ouers . . ."

Nóg Ron nóg Hermione glimlag.

"Maar volgens Beedle die Skrywer sal hulle nie wil terugkom nie, of hoe?" sê Harry, wat dink aan die verhaal wat hulle nou net gehoor het. "Daar was seker nie baie ander stories oor 'n steen wat die dooies kan laat opstaan nie?" vra hy vir Hermione.

"Nee," antwoord sy hartseer. "Ek dink nie enigiemand behalwe meneer Lovegood kan homself wysmaak dat dit moontlik is nie. Beedle het die idee seker by die Towenaar se Steen gekry, weet julle, en toe maak hy dit pleks van 'n steen wat jou onsterflik maak, 'n steen wat die dood ongedaan maak."

Die reuk uit die kombuis word sterker: dit ruik half soos onderbroeke wat brand. Harry wonder of dit moontlik gaan wees om genoeg te eet van wat ook al Xenophilius opdis om sy gevoelens te ontsien.

"Maar wat van die Mantel?" sê Ron stadig. "Besef julle nie hy's reg

nie? Ek het so gewoond geraak aan Harry se Mantel en hoe goed dit werk dat ek nooit twee keer daaroor gedink het nie. Ek het nog nooit van een soos Harry s'n gehoor nie. Dis onfeilbaar. Niemand het ons nog ooit daaronder raakgesien –"

"Maar natuurlik nie – ons is onsigbaar as ons daaronder is, Ron!"

"Maar al die goed wat hy van ander mantels gesê het – en jy skop hulle nie agter elke toorbos uit nie – weet julle, is waar! Ek het nie vroeër daaraan gedink nie, maar ek het al stories gehoor van towerspreuke wat verflou as mantels oud word, of dat paljasse hulle stukkend skeur en hulle gate in kry. Harry s'n het aan sy pa behoort, so dis nie juis nuut nie, is dit, maar dis nogtans . . . perfek!"

"Ja, oukei, maar Ron, die *steen* . . ."

Terwyl hulle fluisterend argumenteer, beweeg Harry deur die vertrek en luister net met 'n halwe oor. Toe hy by die wenteltrap kom, kyk hy ingedagte op na die volgende vlak en sy aandag word dadelik afgelei. Sy eie gesig kyk vanuit die boonste vertrek se plafon na hom toe af.

Ná 'n oomblik van verbystering besef hy dit is nie 'n spieël nie, maar 'n skildery. Hy begin nuuskierig met die trap op loop.

"Harry, wat maak jy? Ek dink nie jy moet rondkyk terwyl hy nie hier is nie!"

Maar Harry is alreeds op die volgende vlak.

Luna het haar slaapkamer se plafon versier met vyf pragtig geverfde gesigte: Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny en Neville s'n. Hulle beweeg nie soos wat die portrette by Hogwarts beweeg nie, maar daar is nogtans iets toweragtigs omtrent hulle: Harry dink hulle haal asem. Iets wat soos fyn goue kettings lyk, is om die skilderye geweef en verbind hulle aan mekaar, maar nadat hy dit vir 'n minuut of so bekyk het, besef Harry die kettings is in werklikheid een woord wat 'n duisend keer in goue ink herhaal is: *vriende . . . vriende . . . vriende . . .*

Harry voel 'n opwelling van geneentheid teenoor Luna. Hy kyk in die kamer rond. Daar is 'n groot foto langs die bed van Luna en 'n vrou wat baie soos sy lyk. Hulle omhels mekaar. Luna lyk op hierdie foto heelwat beter versorg as wat Harry haar nog ooit in die werklike lewe gesien het. Daar is stof op die foto. Harry vind dit effens vreemd. Hy kyk rond.

Iets is verkeerd. Daar lê ook 'n dik laag stof op die ligblou tapyt. Daar is nie klere in die hangkas nie en die kasdeure staan oop. Die bed lyk koud en onvriendelik, asof iemand weke laas daarin geslaap het. 'n Enkele spinnerak strek oor die naaste venster, oor die bloedrooi lug.

"Wat's fout?" vra Hermione toe Harry met die trap afkom, maar voor hy kan antwoord, verskyn Xenophilius aan die bokant van die wenteltrap van die kombuis af, nou met 'n skinkbord vol kommetjies.

"Meneer Lovegood," sê Harry, "waar's Luna?"

"Verskoon my?"

"Waar's Luna?"

Xenophilius stop op die boonste trap.

"Ek – ek het mos al vir julle gesê. Sy is onder by Benede Brug; sy vang Plimpies."

"So hoekom is daar dan net goed vir vier op daai skinkbord?"

Xenophilius probeer praat, maar kry nie 'n enkele klank uit nie. Die enigste geluid is die drukpers wat nog steeds aanhou doef-doef en die skinkbord wat in Xenophilius se hande ratel.

"Ek dink Luna was weke laas hier," sê Harry. "Haar klere is weg en daar's nie in haar bed geslaap nie. Waar is sy? En hoekom kyk jy die hele tyd by die venster uit?"

Xenophilius laat die skinkbord val: die kommetjies bons en breek. Harry, Ron en Hermione pluk hulle towerstawwe uit: Xenophilius vries, sy hand amper in sy sak. Op daardie oomblik maak die drukpers 'n hewige klapgeluid en verskeie *Vitters* stroom van onder die tafeldoek op die vloer uit; die drukpers word uiteindelik stil.

Hermione buk af en tel een van die tydskrifte op met haar towerstaf nog steeds op meneer Lovegood gerig.

"Harry, kyk hier."

Hy beweeg so vinnig as wat hy kan deur die deurmekaarspul tot by haar. Sy foto is op *Die Vitter* se voorblad, versier met die woorde *Ongewenste Nommer Een* en die beloningsbedrag as onderskrif.

"So *Die Vitter* het nou 'n nuwe benadering?" vra Harry kil terwyl sy kop baie vinnig werk. "Is dit wat jy gedoen het toe jy uit tuin toe is, meneer Lovegood? Het jy vir die Ministerie 'n uil gestuur?"

Xenophilius lek sy lippe.

"Hulle het my Luna gevat," fluister hy. "Oor wat ek geskryf het. Hulle het my Luna gevat en ek weet nie waar sy is en wat hulle aan haar gedoen het nie. Maar hulle sal haar dalk vir my teruggee as ek – as ek –"

"Harry uitlewer?" maak Hermione sy sin vir hom klaar.

"Vergeet dit," sê Ron kortaf. "Uit die pad uit, ons gaan waai."

Xenophilius lyk afgryslik, 'n eeu oud, sy lippe opgetrek in 'n grusame gryns.

"Hulle sal nou enige oomblik hier wees. Ek moet Luna red. Ek kan Luna nie verloor nie. Julle moet hier bly."

Hy sprei sy arms oop voor die trap, en Harry sien skielik in sy verbeelding hoe sy ma in dieselfde posisie voor sy kinderbedjie staan.

"Moenie ons dwing om jou seer te maak nie," sê Harry. "Uit die pad uit, meneer Lovegood."

"HARRY!" skree Hermione.

Figure op besemstokke vlieg verby die vensters. Toe die drie van hom af wegkyk, pluk Xenophilius sy towerstaf uit. Harry besef net betyds hulle fout: hy gooi homself sywaarts en stamp Ron en Hermione weg van die gevaar af sodat Xenophilius se Bedwelmspreuk deur die vertrek seil en die Plofhoring tref.

Daar is 'n kolossale ontploffing. Dit is asof die klank daarvan die hele vertrek uitmekaar skiet: stukkies hout en papier en rommel vlieg in alle rigtings, saam met 'n ondeurdringbare wolk dik, wit stof. Harry skiet deur die lug en stort dan op die vloer neer met sy arms oor sy kop. Rommel reën op hom neer en hy kan nie sien nie. Hy hoor Hermione skree en Ron gil, en 'n reeks nare, metaalagtige slae sê vir hom Xenophilius is van sy voete af geblaas en val agteroor by die wenteltrap af.

Halfpad begrawe onder rommel probeer Harry homself oplig: die stof is so dik dat hy skaars kan asemhaal of sien. Die helfte van die plafon het ingeval en die voetenent van Luna se bed hang deur die gat. Rowena Raweklou se borsbeeld lê langs hom met die helfte van die gesig weg, flenters geskeurde perkament fladder deur die lug en die grootste gedeelte van die drukpers lê op sy kant en blokkeer die bokant van die trap na die kombuis. Dan beweeg nog 'n wit figuur naby hom en Hermione, bedek met stof soos 'n tweede standbeeld, hou haar vinger voor haar lippe.

Die deur onder bars oop.

"Het ek nie vir jou gesê dis nie nodig om te jaag nie, Travers?" sê 'n growwe stem. "Het ek nie vir jou gesê hierdie imbesiel gorrel net soos gewoonlik weer nonsens nie?"

Daar is 'n slag en Xenophilius gil van pyn.

"Nee . . . bo . . . boontoe . . . Potter!"

"Ek het jou laas week gesê, Lovegood, ons kom nie weer terug vir enigiets minder as soliede inligting nie! Onthou jy laas week? Toe jy jou dogter vir die simpel bleddie hooftooisel wou ruil? En die vorige week –" nog 'n slag, nog 'n gil, "– toe jy gedink het ons sal haar teruggee as jy vir ons bewys daar bestaan iets soos Frommel –" *kadwar* "– horing" *kadwar* "– Snorklappe?"

"Nee – nee – ek smeek jou!" snik Xenophilius. "Dit is regtig Potter! Regtig!"

"En nou kom ons agter jy't ons net hierheen ontbied om ons te

probeer opblaas!" brul die Doodseter en daar is 'n sarsie houe met Xenophilius se krete van pyn tussenin.

"Dit lyk of die plek enige oomblik inmekaar gaan val, Selwyn," sê 'n kil tweede stem wat teen die halfverwoeste trap op weerklink. "Die trap is heeltemal geblokkeer. Ons kan dit probeer oopkry, maar dan stort die hele plek dalk inmekaar."

"Jou vieslike liegbek!" skree die towenaar genaamd Selwyn. "Jy't Potter nog nooit in jou lewe gesien nie, het jy? Gedink jy kan ons hiernatoe lok en ons doodmaak, hè? Dink jy regtig jy gaan jou dogter so terugkry?"

"Ek sweer . . . ek sweer . . . Potter is hierbo!"

"*Homenum revelio,*" sê die stem aan die voet van die trap.

Harry hoor Hermione na asem snak en hy kry 'n vreemde gevoel, asof iets laag oor hom verbyswiep en sy liggaam in sy skaduwee dompel.

"Daar is iets daarbo, Selwyn," sê die tweede man skerp.

"Dis Potter, ek sê julle, dis Potter!" snik Xenophilius. "Asseblief . . . asseblief . . . gee Luna vir my terug, gee Luna net vir my . . ."

"Jy kan jou dogtertjie kry, Lovegood," sê Selwyn, "as jy maak dat jy by daai trap op kom en Harry Potter vir my bring. Maar as dit 'n komplot is, as dit 'n skelmstreek is, as jy 'n handlanger het wat daarbo wag om ons in 'n lokval te lei, sal ons sien of ons vir jou 'n stukkie van jou dogter kan oorhou om te begrawe."

Xenophilius weeklaag van vrees en wanhoop. Daar is 'n geskarrel en geskraap: Xenophilius probeer om verby die rommel op die trap te kom.

"Komaan," fluister Harry, "ons moet hier uitkom."

Hy benut die geraas wat Xenophilius op die trap maak om onder die gemors wat oor hom gesaai lê uit te kom. Ron is die diepste begrawe: Harry en Hermione klim so saggies as wat hulle kan oor die puin na waar hy lê en probeer 'n swaar laaikas van sy bene aflig. Terwyl Xenophilius se gekap en gekrap al hoe nader kom, slaag Hermione daarin om Ron met 'n Sweefspreuk los te kry.

"Nou goed," prewel Hermione toe die gebreekte drukpers wat die trap se bokant versper, begin bewe; Xenophilius is 'n entjie van hulle af. Sy is nog steeds wit van die stof. "Vertrou jy my, Harry?"

Harry knik.

"Oukei dan," fluister Hermione, "gee vir my die Onsigbaarheidsmantel. Ron, jy gaan dit oor jou gooi."

"Ek? Maar Harry –"

"*Asseblief, Ron!* Harry, hou styf aan my hand vas; Ron, gryp my skouer."

Harry hou sy linkerhand uit. Ron verdwyn onder die Mantel. Die drukpers wat die trap blokkeer, begin vibreer toe Xenophilius dit met behulp van 'n Sweefspreuk wegskuif. Harry weet nie waarvoor Hermione wag nie.

"Hou styf vas," fluister sy. "Hou styf vas . . . Enige oomblik nou . . ."

Xenophilius se papierwit gesig verskyn oor die bokant van die buffet.

"Obliviaté!" roep Hermione uit terwyl sy eers met haar towerstaf na sy gesig toe wys en dan na die vloer onder hulle: *"Deprimo!"*

Sy het 'n gat deur die sitkamervloer geskiet. Hulle val soos rotsblokke terwyl Harry vir al wat hy werd is aan haar hand vashou. Daar is 'n gil van onder af en hy sien uit die hoek van sy oog hoe twee mans uit die pad probeer kom terwyl 'n geweldige klomp rommel en gebreekte meubels vanuit die verwoeste plafon oral om hulle neerreën. Hermione tol tussen hemel en aarde en die dawerende geluid van die huis wat ineenstort, weerklink in Harry se ore terwyl sy hom weer eens die duisternis insleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



THE DEATHLY HALLOWS

Harry fell, panting, onto grass and scrambled up at once. They seemed to have landed in the corner of a field at dusk; Hermione was already running in a circle around them, waving her wand.

"*Protego Totalum . . . Salvio Hexia . . .*"

"That treacherous old bleeder!" Ron panted, emerging from beneath the Invisibility Cloak and throwing it to Harry. "Hermione, you're a genius, a total genius, I can't believe we got out of that!"

"*Cave Inimicum . . .* Didn't I *say* it was an Erumpent horn, didn't I tell him? And now his house has been blown apart!"

"Serves him right," said Ron, examining his torn jeans and the cuts to his legs. "What d'you reckon they'll do to him?"

"Oh, I hope they don't kill him!" groaned Hermione. "That's why I wanted the Death Eaters to get a glimpse of Harry before we left, so they knew Xenophilius hadn't been lying!"

"Why hide me, though?" asked Ron.

"You're supposed to be in bed with spattergroit, Ron! They've kidnapped Luna because her father supported Harry! What would happen to your family if they knew you're with him?"

"But what about *your* mum and dad?"

"They're in Australia," said Hermione. "They should be all right. They don't know anything."

"You're a genius," Ron repeated, looking awed.

"Yeah, you are, Hermione," agreed Harry fervently. "I don't know what we'd do without you."

She beamed, but became solemn at once.

"What about Luna?"

"Well, if they're telling the truth and she's still alive —" began Ron.

"Don't say that, don't say it!" squealed Hermione. "She must be alive, she must!"

"Then she'll be in Azkaban, I expect," said Ron. "Whether she survives the place, though . . . Loads don't. . . ."

"She will," said Harry. He could not bear to contemplate the alternative. "She's tough, Luna, much tougher than you'd think. She's probably teaching all the inmates about Wrackspurts and Nargles."

"I hope you're right," said Hermione. She passed a hand over her eyes. "I'd feel so sorry for Xenophilius if —"

"— if he hadn't just tried to sell us to the Death Eaters, yeah," said Ron.

They put up the tent and retreated inside it, where Ron made them tea. After their narrow escape, the chilly, musty old place felt like home: safe, familiar, and friendly.

"Oh, why did we go there?" groaned Hermione after a few minutes' silence. "Harry, you were right, it was Godric's Hollow all over again, a complete waste of time! The Deathly Hallows . . . such rubbish . . . although actually," a sudden thought seemed to have struck her, "he might have made it all up, mightn't he? He probably doesn't believe in the Deathly Hallows at all, he just wanted to keep us talking until the Death Eaters arrived!"

"I don't think so," said Ron. "It's a damn sight harder making stuff up when you're under stress than you'd think. I found that out when the Snatchers caught me. It was much easier pretending to be Stan, because I knew a bit about him, than inventing a whole new person. Old Lovegood was under loads of pressure, trying to make sure we stayed put. I reckon he told us the truth, or what he thinks is the truth, just to keep us talking."

"Well, I don't suppose it matters," sighed Hermione. "Even if he was being honest, I never heard such a lot of nonsense in all my life."

"Hang on, though," said Ron. "The Chamber of Secrets was supposed to be a myth, wasn't it?"

"But the Deathly Hallows *can't* exist, Ron!"

"You keep saying that, but one of them can," said Ron. "Harry's Invisibility Cloak —"

"'The Tale of the Three Brothers' is a story," said Hermione

firmly. "A story about how humans are frightened of death. If surviving was as simple as hiding under the Invisibility Cloak, we'd have everything we need already!"

"I don't know. We could do with an unbeatable wand," said Harry, turning the blackthorn wand he so disliked over in his fingers.

"There's no such thing, Harry!"

"You said there have been loads of wands — the Deathstick and whatever they were called —"

"All right, even if you want to kid yourself the Elder Wand's real, what about the Resurrection Stone?" Her fingers sketched quotation marks around the name, and her tone dripped sarcasm. "No magic can raise the dead, and that's that!"

"When my wand connected with You-Know-Who's, it made my mum and dad appear . . . and Cedric . . ."

"But they weren't really back from the dead, were they?" said Hermione. "Those kinds of — of pale imitations aren't the same as truly bringing someone back to life."

"But she, the girl in the tale, didn't really come back, did she? The story says that once people are dead, they belong with the dead. But the second brother still got to see her and talk to her, didn't he? He even lived with her for a while. . . ."

He saw concern and something less easily definable in Hermione's expression. Then, as she glanced at Ron, Harry realized that it was fear: He had scared her with his talk of living with dead people.

"So that Peverell bloke who's buried in Godric's Hollow," he said hastily, trying to sound robustly sane, "you don't know anything about him, then?"

"No," she replied, looking relieved at the change of subject. "I looked him up after I saw the mark on his grave; if he'd been anyone famous or done anything important, I'm sure he'd be in one of our books. The only place I've managed to find the name 'Peverell' is *Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*. I borrowed it from Kreacher," she explained as Ron raised his eyebrows. "It lists the pure-blood families that are now extinct in the male line. Apparently the Peverells were one of the earliest families to vanish."

"'Extinct in the male line'?" repeated Ron.

"It means the name's died out," said Hermione, "centuries ago, in the case of the Peverells. They could still have descendants, though, they'd just be called something different."

And then it came to Harry in one shining piece, the memory that had stirred at the sound of the name "Peverell": a filthy old man brandishing an ugly ring in the face of a Ministry official, and he cried aloud, "Marvolo Gaunt!"

"Sorry?" said Ron and Hermione together.

"*Marvolo Gaunt!* You-Know-Who's grandfather! In the Pensieve! With Dumbledore! Marvolo Gaunt said he was descended from the Peverells!"

Ron and Hermione looked bewildered.

"The ring, the ring that became the Horcrux, Marvolo Gaunt said it had the Peverell coat of arms on it! I saw him waving it in the bloke from the Ministry's face, he nearly shoved it up his nose!"

"The Peverell coat of arms?" said Hermione sharply. "Could you see what it looked like?"

"Not really," said Harry, trying to remember. "There was nothing

fancy on there, as far as I could see; maybe a few scratches. I only ever saw it really close up after it had been cracked open."

Harry saw Hermione's comprehension in the sudden widening of her eyes. Ron was looking from one to the other, astonished.

"Blimey . . . You reckon it was this sign again? The sign of the Hallows?"

"Why not?"said Harry excitedly. "Marvolo Gaunt was an ignorant old git who lived like a pig, all he cared about was his ancestry. If that ring had been passed down through the centuries, he might not have known what it really was. There were no books in that house, and trust me, he wasn't the type to read fairy tales to his kids. He'd have loved to think the scratches on the stone were a coat of arms, because as far as he was concerned, having pure blood made you practically royal."

"Yes . . . and that's all very interesting," said Hermione cautiously, "but Harry, if you're thinking what I think you're think —"

"Well, why not? *Why not?*" said Harry, abandoning caution. "It was a stone, wasn't it?" He looked at Ron for support. "What if it was the Resurrection Stone?"

Ron's mouth fell open.

"Blimey — but would it still work if Dumbledore broke — ?"

"Work? *Work?* Ron, it never worked! *There's no such thing as a Resurrection Stone!*"

Hermione had leapt to her feet, looking exasperated and angry. "Harry, you're trying to fit everything into the Hallows story —"

"Fit everything in?" he repeated. "Hermione, it fits of its own accord! I know the sign of the Deathly Hallows was on that stone!

Gaunt said he was descended from the Peverells!"

"A minute ago you told us you never saw the mark on the stone properly!"

"Where d'you reckon the ring is now?" Ron asked Harry. "What did Dumbledore do with it after he broke it open?"

But Harry's imagination was racing ahead, far beyond Ron and Hermione's. . . .

Three objects, or Hallows, which, if united, will make the possessor master of Death . . . Master . . . Conqueror . . . Vanquisher . . . The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. . . .

And he saw himself, possessor of the Hallows, facing Voldemort, whose Horcruxes were no match . . . *Neither can live while the other survives. . . .* Was this the answer? Hallows versus Horcruxes? Was there a way, after all, to ensure that he was the one who triumphed? If he were the master of the Deathly Hallows, would he be safe?

"Harry?"

But he scarcely heard Hermione: He had pulled out his Invisibility Cloak and was running it through his fingers, the cloth supple as water, light as air. He had never seen anything to equal it in his nearly seven years in the Wizarding world. The Cloak was exactly what Xenophilius had described: *A cloak that really and truly renders the wearer completely invisible, and endures eternally, giving constant and impenetrable concealment, no matter what spells are cast at it. . . .*

And then, with a gasp, he remembered —

"Dumbledore had my Cloak the night my parents died!"

His voice shook and he could feel the color in his face, but he did not care.

"My mum told Sirius that Dumbledore borrowed the Cloak! This is why! He wanted to examine it, because he thought it was the third Hallow! Ignotus Peverell is buried in Godric's Hollow. . . ." Harry was walking blindly around the tent, feeling as though great new vistas of truth were opening all around him. "He's my ancestor! I'm descended from the third brother! It all makes sense!"

He felt armed in certainty, in his belief in the Hallows, as if the mere idea of possessing them was giving him protection, and he felt joyous as he turned back to the other two.

"Harry," said Hermione again, but he was busy undoing the pouch around his neck, his fingers shaking hard.

"Read it," he told her, pushing his mother's letter into her hand. "Read it! Dumbledore had the Cloak, Hermione! Why else would he want it? He didn't need a Cloak, he could perform a Disillusionment Charm so powerful that he made himself completely invisible without one!"

Something fell to the floor and rolled, glittering, under a chair: He had dislodged the Snitch when he pulled out the letter. He stooped to pick it up, and then the newly tapped spring of fabulous discoveries threw him another gift, and shock and wonder erupted inside him so that he shouted out.

"IT'S IN HERE! He left me the ring — it's in the Snitch!"

"You — you reckon?"

He could not understand why Ron looked taken aback. It was so obvious, so clear to Harry: Everything fit, everything . . . His Cloak

was the third Hallow, and when he discovered how to open the Snitch he would have the second, and then all he needed to do was find the first Hallow, the Elder Wand, and then —

But it was as though a curtain fell on a lit stage: All his excitement, all his hope and happiness were extinguished at a stroke, and he stood alone in the darkness, and the glorious spell was broken.

"That's what he's after."

The change in his voice made Ron and Hermione look even more scared.

"You-Know-Who's after the Elder Wand."

He turned his back on their strained, incredulous faces. He knew it was the truth. It all made sense. Voldemort was not seeking a new wand; he was seeking an old wand, a very old wand indeed. Harry walked to the entrance of the tent, forgetting about Ron and Hermione as he looked out into the night, thinking. . . .

Voldemort had been raised in a Muggle orphanage. Nobody could have told him *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* when he was a child, any more than Harry had heard them. Hardly any wizards believed in the Deathly Hallows. Was it likely that Voldemort knew about them?

Harry gazed into the darkness. . . . If Voldemort had known about the Deathly Hallows, surely he would have sought them, done anything to possess them: three objects that made the possessor master of Death? If he had known about the Deathly Hallows, he might not have needed Horcruxes in the first place. Didn't the simple fact that he had taken a Hallow, and turned it into a Horcrux, demonstrate that he did not know this last great Wizarding secret?

Which meant that Voldemort sought the Elder Wand without

realizing its full power, without understanding that it was one of three . . . for the wand was the Hallow that could not be hidden, whose existence was best known. . . . *The bloody trail of the Elder Wand is splattered across the pages of Wizarding history* . . .

Harry watched the cloudy sky, curves of smoke-gray and silver sliding over the face of the white moon. He felt lightheaded with amazement at his discoveries.

He turned back into the tent. It was a shock to see Ron and Hermione standing exactly where he had left them, Hermione still holding Lily's letter, Ron at her side looking slightly anxious. Didn't they realize how far they had traveled in the last few minutes?

"This is it," Harry said, trying to bring them inside the glow of his own astonished certainty. "This explains everything. The Deathly Hallows are real, and I've got one — maybe two —"

He held up the Snitch.

"— and You-Know-Who's chasing the third, but he doesn't realize . . . he just thinks it's a powerful wand —"

"Harry," said Hermione, moving across to him and handing him back Lily's letter, "I'm sorry, but I think you've got this wrong, all wrong."

"But don't you see? It all fits —"

"No, it doesn't," she said. "It *doesn't*, Harry, you're just getting carried away. Please," she said as he started to speak, "please just answer me this: If the Deathly Hallows really existed, and Dumbledore knew about them, knew that the person who possessed all three of them would be master of Death — Harry, why wouldn't he have told you? Why?"

He had his answer ready.

"But you said it, Hermione! You've got to find out about them for yourself! It's a Quest!"

"But I only said that to try and persuade you to come to the Lovegoods'!" cried Hermione in exasperation. "I didn't really believe it!"

Harry took no notice.

"Dumbledore usually let me find out stuff for myself. He let me try my strength, take risks. This feels like the kind of thing he'd do."

"Harry, this isn't a game, this isn't practice! This is the real thing, and Dumbledore left you very clear instructions: Find and destroy the Horcruxes! That symbol doesn't mean anything, forget the Deathly Hallows, we can't afford to get sidetracked —"

Harry was barely listening to her. He was turning the Snitch over and over in his hands, half expecting it to break open, to reveal the Resurrection Stone, to prove to Hermione that he was right, that the Deathly Hallows were real.

She appealed to Ron.

"You don't believe in this, do you?"

Harry looked up. Ron hesitated.

"I dunno . . . I mean . . . bits of it sort of fit together," said Ron awkwardly. "But when you look at the whole thing . . ." He took a deep breath. "I think we're supposed to get rid of Horcruxes, Harry. That's what Dumbledore told us to do. Maybe . . . maybe we should forget about this Hallows business."

"Thank you, Ron," said Hermione. "I'll take first watch."

And she strode past Harry and sat down in the tent entrance,

bringing the action to a fierce full stop.

But Harry hardly slept that night. The idea of the Deathly Hallows had taken possession of him, and he could not rest while agitating thoughts whirled through his mind: the wand, the stone, and the Cloak, if he could just possess them all. . . .

I open at the close. . . . But what was 'the close'? Why couldn't he have the stone now? If only he had the stone, he could ask Dumbledore these questions in person . . . and Harry murmured words to the Snitch in the darkness, trying everything, even Parseltongue, but the golden ball would not open. . . .

And the wand, the Elder Wand, where was that hidden? Where was Voldemort searching now? Harry wished his scar would burn and show him Voldemort's thoughts, because for the first time ever, he and Voldemort were united in wanting the very same thing. . . . Hermione would not like that idea, of course. . . . But then, she did not believe . . . Xenophilius had been right, in a way . . . *Limited. Narrow. Close-minded.* The truth was that she was scared of the idea of the Deathly Hallows, especially of the Resurrection Stone . . . and Harry pressed his mouth again to the Snitch, kissing it, nearly swallowing it, but the cold metal did not yield. . . .

It was nearly dawn when he remembered Luna, alone in a cell in Azkaban, surrounded by dementors, and he suddenly felt ashamed of himself. He had forgotten all about her in his feverish contemplation of the Hallows. If only they could rescue her; but dementors in those numbers would be virtually unassailable. Now he came to think about it, he had not yet tried casting a Patronus with the blackthorn wand. . . . He must try that in the morning. . . .

If only there was a way of getting a better wand . . .

And desire for the Elder Wand, the Deathstick, unbeatable, invincible, swallowed him once more. . . .

They packed up the tent next morning and moved on through a dreary shower of rain. The downpour pursued them to the coast, where they pitched the tent that night, and persisted through the whole week, through sodden landscapes that Harry found bleak and depressing. He could think only of the Deathly Hallows. It was as though a flame had been lit inside him that nothing, not Hermione's flat disbelief nor Ron's persistent doubts, could extinguish. And yet the fiercer the longing for the Hallows burned inside him, the less joyful it made him. He blamed Ron and Hermione: Their determined indifference was as bad as the relentless rain for dampening his spirits, but neither could erode his certainty, which remained absolute. Harry's belief in and longing for the Hallows consumed him so much that he felt quite isolated from the other two and their obsession with the Horcruxes.

"Obsession?" said Hermione in a low fierce voice, when Harry was careless enough to use the word one evening, after Hermione had told him off for his lack of interest in locating more Horcruxes. "We're not the ones with an obsession, Harry! We're the ones trying to do what Dumbledore wanted us to do!"

But he was impervious to the veiled criticism. Dumbledore had left the sign of the Hallows for Hermione to decipher, and he had also, Harry remained convinced of it, left the Resurrection Stone hidden in the golden Snitch. *Neither can live while the other survives . . . master of Death . . .* Why didn't Ron and Hermione

understand?

"*'The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death,'*" Harry quoted calmly.

"I thought it was You-Know-Who we were supposed to be fighting?" Hermione retorted, and Harry gave up on her.

Even the mystery of the silver doe, which the other two insisted on discussing, seemed less important to Harry now, a vaguely interesting sideshow. The only other thing that mattered to him was that his scar had begun to prickle again, although he did all he could to hide this fact from the other two. He sought solitude whenever it happened, but was disappointed by what he saw. The visions he and Voldemort were sharing had changed in quality; they had become blurred, shifting as though they were moving in and out of focus. Harry was just able to make out the indistinct features of an object that looked like a skull, and something like a mountain that was more shadow than substance. Used to images sharp as reality, Harry was disconcerted by the change. He was worried that the connection between himself and Voldemort had been damaged, a connection that he both feared and, whatever he had told Hermione, prized. Somehow Harry connected these unsatisfying, vague images with the destruction of his wand, as if it was the blackthorn wand's fault that he could no longer see into Voldemort's mind as well as before.

As the weeks crept on, Harry could not help but notice, even through his new self-absorption, that Ron seemed to be taking charge. Perhaps because he was determined to make up for having walked out on them, perhaps because Harry's descent into listlessness galvanized his dormant leadership qualities, Ron was the one now

encouraging and exhorting the other two into action.

"Three Horcruxes left," he kept saying. "We need a plan of action, come on! Where haven't we looked? Let's go through it again. The orphanage . . ."

Diagon Alley, Hogwarts, the Riddle House, Borgin and Burkes, Albania, every place that they knew Tom Riddle had ever lived or worked, visited or murdered, Ron and Hermione raked over them again, Harry joining in only to stop Hermione pestering him. He would have been happy to sit alone in silence, trying to read Voldemort's thoughts, to find out more about the Elder Wand, but Ron insisted on journeying to ever more unlikely places simply, Harry was aware, to keep them moving.

"You never know," was Ron's constant refrain. "Upper Flagley is a Wizarding village, he might've wanted to live there. Let's go and have a poke around."

These frequent forays into Wizarding territory brought them within occasional sight of Snatchers.

"Some of them are supposed to be as bad as Death Eaters," said Ron. "The lot that got me were a bit pathetic, but Bill reckons some of them are really dangerous. They said on *Potterwatch* —"

"On what?" said Harry.

"*Potterwatch,* didn't I tell you that's what it was called? The program I keep trying to get on the radio, the only one that tells the truth about what's going on! Nearly all the programs are following You-Know-Who's line, all except *Potterwatch*. I really want you to hear it, but it's tricky tuning in. . . ."

Ron spent evening after evening using his wand to beat out various

rhythms on top of the wireless while the dials whirled. Occasionally they would catch snatches of advice on how to treat dragon pox, and once a few bars of "A Cauldron Full of Hot Strong Love." While he tapped, Ron continued to try to hit on the correct password, muttering strings of random words under his breath.

"They're normally something to do with the Order," he told them. "Bill had a real knack for guessing them. I'm bound to get one in the end. . . ."

But not until March did luck favor Ron at last. Harry was sitting in the tent entrance, on guard duty, staring idly at a clump of grape hyacinths that had forced their way through the chilly ground, when Ron shouted excitedly from inside the tent.

"I've got it, I've got it! Password was 'Albus'! Get in here, Harry!"

Roused for the first time in days from his contemplation of the Deathly Hallows, Harry hurried back inside the tent to find Ron and Hermione kneeling on the floor beside the little radio. Hermione, who had been polishing the sword of Gryffindor just for something to do, was sitting open-mouthed, staring at the tiny speaker, from which a most familiar voice was issuing.

". . . apologize for our temporary absence from the airwaves, which was due to a number of house calls in our area by those charming Death Eaters."

"But that's Lee Jordan!" said Hermione.

"I know!" beamed Ron. "Cool, eh?"

". . . now found ourselves another secure location," Lee was saying, "and I'm pleased to tell you that two of our regular

contributors have joined me here this evening. Evening, boys!"

"Hi."

"Evening, River."

"'River,' that's Lee," Ron explained. "They've all got code names, but you can usually tell —"

"Shh!" said Hermione.

"But before we hear from Royal and Romulus," Lee went on, "let's take a moment to report those deaths that the *Wizarding Wireless Network News* and *Daily Prophet* don't think important enough to mention. It is with great regret that we inform our listeners of the murders of Ted Tonks and Dirk Cresswell."

Harry felt a sick, swooping in his belly. He, Ron, and Hermione gazed at one another in horror.

"A goblin by the name of Gornuk was also killed. It is believed that Muggle-born Dean Thomas and a second goblin, both believed to have been traveling with Tonks, Cresswell, and Gornuk, may have escaped. If Dean is listening, or if anyone has any knowledge of his whereabouts, his parents and sisters are desperate for news.

"Meanwhile, in Gaddley, a Muggle family of five has been found dead in their home. Muggle authorities are attributing the deaths to a gas leak, but members of the Order of the Phoenix inform me that it was the Killing Curse — more evidence, as if it were needed, of the fact that Muggle slaughter is becoming little more than a recreational sport under the new regime.

"Finally, we regret to inform our listeners that the remains of Bathilda Bagshot have been discovered in Godric's Hollow. The evidence is that she died several months ago. The Order of the

Phoenix informs us that her body showed unmistakable signs of injuries inflicted by Dark Magic.

"Listeners, I'd like to invite you now to join us in a minute's silence in memory of Ted Tonks, Dirk Cresswell, Bathilda Bagshot, Gornuk, and the unnamed, but no less regretted, Muggles murdered by the Death Eaters."

Silence fell, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione did not speak. Half of Harry yearned to hear more, half of him was afraid of what might come next. It was the first time he had felt fully connected to the outside world for a long time.

"Thank you," said Lee's voice. "And now we turn to regular contributor Royal, for an update on how the new Wizarding order is affecting the Muggle world."

"Thanks, River," said an unmistakable voice, deep, measured, reassuring.

"Kingsley!" burst out Ron.

"We know!" said Hermione, hushing him.

"Muggles remain ignorant of the source of their suffering as they continue to sustain heavy casualties," said Kingsley. "However, we continue to hear truly inspirational stories of wizards and witches risking their own safety to protect Muggle friends and neighbors, often without the Muggles' knowledge. I'd like to appeal to all our listeners to emulate their example, perhaps by casting a protective charm over any Muggle dwellings in your street. Many lives could be saved if such simple measures are taken."

"And what would you say, Royal, to those listeners who reply that in these dangerous times, it should be 'Wizards first'?" asked Lee.

"I'd say that it's one short step from 'Wizards first' to 'Purebloods first,' and then to 'Death Eaters,'" replied Kingsley. "We're all human, aren't we? Every human life is worth the same, and worth saving."

"Excellently put, Royal, and you've got my vote for Minister of Magic if ever we get out of this mess," said Lee. "And now, over to Romulus for our popular feature 'Pals of Potter.'"

"Thanks, River," said another very familiar voice; Ron started to speak, but Hermione forestalled him in a whisper.

"We know it's Lupin!"

"Romulus, do you maintain, as you have every time you've appeared on our program, that Harry Potter is still alive?"

"I do," said Lupin firmly. "There is no doubt at all in my mind that his death would be proclaimed as widely as possible by the Death Eaters if it had happened, because it would strike a deadly blow at the morale of those resisting the new regime. 'The Boy Who Lived' remains a symbol of everything for which we are fighting: the triumph of good, the power of innocence, the need to keep resisting."

A mixture of gratitude and shame welled up in Harry. Had Lupin forgiven him, then, for the terrible things he had said when they had last met?

"And what would you say to Harry if you knew he was listening, Romulus?"

"I'd tell him we're all with him in spirit," said Lupin, then hesitated slightly. "And I'd tell him to follow his instincts, which are good and nearly always right."

Harry looked at Hermione, whose eyes were full of tears.

"Nearly always right," she repeated.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" said Ron in surprise. "Bill told me Lupin's living with Tonks again! And apparently she's getting pretty big too. . . ."

". . . and our usual update on those friends of Harry Potter's who are suffering for their allegiance?" Lee was saying.

"Well, as regular listeners will know, several of the more outspoken supporters of Harry Potter have now been imprisoned, including Xenophilius Lovegood, erstwhile editor of *The Quibbler*," said Lupin.

"At least he's still alive!" muttered Ron.

"We have also heard within the last few hours that Rubeus Hagrid" — all three of them gasped, and so nearly missed the rest of the sentence — "well-known gamekeeper at Hogwarts School, has narrowly escaped arrest within the grounds of Hogwarts, where he is rumored to have hosted a 'Support Harry Potter' party in his house. However, Hagrid was not taken into custody, and is, we believe, on the run."

"I suppose it helps, when escaping from Death Eaters, if you've got a sixteen-foot-high half brother?" asked Lee.

"It would tend to give you an edge," agreed Lupin gravely. "May I just add that while we here at *Potterwatch* applaud Hagrid's spirit, we would urge even the most devoted of Harry's supporters against following Hagrid's lead. 'Support Harry Potter' parties are unwise in the present climate."

"Indeed they are, Romulus," said Lee, "so we suggest that you continue to show your devotion to the man with the lightning scar by

listening to *Potterwatch*! And now let's move to news concerning the wizard who is proving just as elusive as Harry Potter. We like to refer to him as the Chief Death Eater, and here to give his views on some of the more insane rumors circulating about him, I'd like to introduce a new correspondent: Rodent."

"*'Rodent'?*" said yet another familiar voice, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione cried out together:

"Fred!"

"No — is it George?"

"It's Fred, I think," said Ron, leaning in closer, as whichever twin it was said,

"I'm not being 'Rodent,' no way, I told you I wanted to be 'Rapier'!"

"Oh, all right then. 'Rapier,' could you please give us your take on the various stories we've been hearing about the Chief Death Eater?"

"Yes, River, I can," said Fred. "As our listeners will know, unless they've taken refuge at the bottom of a garden pond or somewhere similar, You-Know-Who's strategy of remaining in the shadows is creating a nice little climate of panic. Mind you, if all the alleged sightings of him are genuine, we must have a good nineteen You-Know-Whos running around the place."

"Which suits him, of course," said Kingsley. "The air of mystery is creating more terror than actually showing himself."

"Agreed," said Fred. "So, people, let's try and calm down a bit. Things are bad enough without inventing stuff as well. For instance, this new idea that You-Know-Who can kill with a single glance from his eyes. That's a *basilisk*, listeners. One simple test: Check whether

the thing that's glaring at you has got legs. If it has, it's safe to look into its eyes, although if it really is You-Know-Who, that's still likely to be the last thing you ever do."

For the first time in weeks and weeks, Harry was laughing: He could feel the weight of tension leaving him.

"And the rumors that he keeps being sighted abroad?" asked Lee.

"Well, who wouldn't want a nice little holiday after all the hard work he's been putting in?" asked Fred. "Point is, people, don't get lulled into a false sense of security, thinking he's out of the country. Maybe he is, maybe he isn't, but the fact remains he can move faster than Severus Snape confronted with shampoo when he wants to, so don't count on him being a long way away if you're planning on taking any risks. I never thought I'd hear myself say it, but safety first!"

"Thank you very much for those wise words, Rapier," said Lee. "Listeners, that brings us to the end of another *Potterwatch*. We don't know when it will be possible to broadcast again, but you can be sure we shall be back. Keep twiddling those dials: The next password will be 'Mad-Eye.' Keep each other safe: Keep faith. Good night."

The radio's dial twirled and the lights behind the tuning panel went out. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were still beaming. Hearing familiar, friendly voices was an extraordinary tonic; Harry had become so used to their isolation he had nearly forgotten that other people were resisting Voldemort. It was like waking from a long sleep.

"Good, eh?" said Ron happily.

"Brilliant," said Harry.

“It’s so brave of them,” sighed Hermione admiringly. “If they were found . . .”

“Well, they keep on the move, don’t they?” said Ron. “Like us.”

“But did you hear what Fred said?” asked Harry excitedly; now the broadcast was over, his thoughts turned again toward his all-consuming obsession. “He’s abroad! He’s still looking for the Wand, I knew it!”

“Harry —”

“Come on, Hermione, why are you so determined not to admit it? Vol —”

“HARRY, NO!”

“— demort’s after the Elder Wand!”

“The name’s Taboo!” Ron bellowed, leaping to his feet as a loud crack sounded outside the tent. “I told you, Harry, I told you, we can’t say it anymore — we’ve got to put the protection back around us — quickly — it’s how they find —”

But Ron stopped talking, and Harry knew why. The Sneakoscope on the table had lit up and begun to spin; they could hear voices coming nearer and nearer: rough, excited voices. Ron pulled the Deluminator out of his pocket and clicked it: Their lamps went out.

“Come out of there with your hands up!” came a rasping voice through the darkness. “We know you’re in there! You’ve got half a dozen wands pointing at you and we don’t care who we curse!”

Die Skatte van die Dood

Harry val hygend op gras en strompel dadelik orent. Dit is skemer en dit lyk of hulle in die hoek van 'n weiveld geland het; Hermione hardloop reeds in 'n sirkel om hulle en swaai haar towerstaf.

"Protego totalum . . . Salvio hexia . . ."

"Daai bleddie ou tweegesig!" sê Ron uitasem terwyl hy onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel uit verskyn en dit na Harry toe gooi. "Hermione, jy's 'n genie, 'n absolute genie, ek kan nie glo ons het daar weggekom nie!"

"*Cave inimicum* . . . Ek het mos gesê dis 'n Plofhoring daai! Ek het hom gewaarsku! En nou is sy hele huis uitmekaar geblaas!"

"Dis sy verdiende loon," sê Ron, wat sy geskeurde jeans en die snye op sy bene bekyk. "Wat dink julle gaan hulle met hom doen?"

"O, ek hoop nie hulle maak hom dood nie!" kreun Hermione. "Dis hoekom ek wou hê die Doodseters moet Harry skrams sien voor ons verdwyn, sodat hulle kan weet Xenophilius het nie gejok nie!"

"Maar hoekom het jy my weggesteek?" vra Ron.

"Want jy's veronderstel om in die bed te wees met waterpokkies, Ron! Hulle het Luna ontvoer omdat haar pa vir Harry ondersteun het! Wat sal met jou familie gebeur as hulle moet weet jy's by hom?"

"Maar wat van *jou* ma en pa?"

"Hulle's in Australië," sê Hermione. "Hulle behoort oukei te wees. Hulle weet van niks nie."

"Jy's 'n genie," herhaal Ron vol ontsag.

"Ja, jy is, Hermione," stem Harry vurig saam, "ek weet nie wat ons sonder jou sou gedoen het nie."

Sy straal, maar word dadelik weer ernstig.

"Wat van Luna?"

"Wel, as hulle die waarheid praat en sy lewe nog –" begin Ron.

"Moenie dit sê nie, moenie so sê nie!" roep Hermione uit. "Sy moet nog lewe, sy moet!"

"Dan is sy in Azkaban, as jy my vra," sê Ron. "Weet nie of sy daai plek sal oorleef nie . . . baie maak dit nie . . ."

"Sy sal," sê Harry. Hy kan dit nie verdra om aan die alternatief te dink nie. "Luna is taai, baie taaier as wat julle dink. Ek wed julle sy's besig om vir die gevangenes van Jigjorse en Nargels te leer."

"Ek hoop jy's reg," sê Hermione. Sy vee met 'n hand oor haar oë. "Ek sal Xenophilius so jammer kry as –"

"– as hy ons nie nou net aan die Doodseters probeer uitlewer het nie, ja," sê Ron.

Hulle slaan die tent op en gaan binnetoe, waar Ron vir hulle tee maak. Ná hulle noue ontkoming voel die koue, muwwerige ou plek soos 'n tuiste, veilig, bekend en vriendelik.

"Ai, hoekom is ons soontoe?" kerm Hermione ná 'n paar minute van stilte. "Harry, jy was reg, dit was weer Godric's Hollow van voor af, totale tydmors! Die Skatte van die Dood . . . sulke snert . . . of anders," en dit lyk of iets haar skielik te binne skiet, "anders het hy alles dalk net opgemaak, nè? Hy glo heel moontlik glad nie in die Skatte van die Dood se bestaan nie, hy wou ons net aan die gesels hou tot die Doodseters daar aankom!"

"Ek dink nie so nie," sê Ron. "Dis tien keer moeiliker as wat jy dink om goed op te maak as jy gestres is. Ek het dit uitgevind toe die Grypers my vang. Dit was baie makliker om te maak of ek Stan is omdat ek so 'n paar goed van hom weet, as om 'n hele nuwe persoon uit my duim te suig. Ou Lovegood was onder hengse druk om seker te maak ons bly daar. Ek is seker hy't vir ons die waarheid vertel, of wat hy dink die waarheid is, net om ons aan die praat te hou."

"Wel, ek glo nie dit maak saak nie," sug Hermione. "Selfs al was hy eerlik, het ek in my hele lewe nog nooit soveel nonsens gehoor nie."

"Nee, wag 'n bietjie," sê Ron. "Die Kamer van Geheimenisse was veronderstel om 'n mite te wees, of hoe?"

"Maar die Skatte van die Dood *kan nie* bestaan nie, Ron!"

"Jy sê aanhoudend so, maar een kan wel," sê Ron. "Harry se Onsigbaarheidsmantel –"

"'Die Verhaal van die Drie Broers' is 'n storie," sê Hermione streng. "'n Storie oor hoe bang mense vir die dood is. As oorlewing so eenvoudig is soos om onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel weg te kruip, het ons klaar alles gehad wat ons nodig het!"

"Ek weet nie. 'n Onoorwinlike towerstaf sal welkom wees," sê Harry en draai die swartdoringtowerstaf waaraan hy so 'n hekel het om en om sy vingers.

"Daar bestaan nie so iets nie, Harry!"

"Jy het gesê daar was al tonne towerstawwe – die Doodstok en wat ook al hulle genoem is –"

"Nou goed, selfs al wil jy jouself wysmaak dat die Vlierstaf werklik bestaan, wat van die Opstandingsteen?" Haar vingers maak in die lug aanhalingstekens om die woord en haar stem drup van sarkasme. "G'n towerkrag kan mense uit die dood laat opstaan nie, en klaar!"

"Toe my towerstaf met Jy-Weet-Wie s'n verbind was, het dit my ma en pa laat verskyn . . . en Cedric . . ."

"Maar hulle het nie regtig uit die dood opgestaan nie, het hulle?" sê Hermione. "Daardie soort van – flou namaaksels is nie dieselfde as om iemand regtig weer lewend te maak nie."

"Maar sy, die meisie in die storie, het nie regtig teruggekom nie, het sy? Die storie sê as mense eers eenkeer dood is, dan hoort hulle by die dooies. Maar die tweede broer het haar tog gesien en met haar gepraat, of hoe? Hy't selfs 'n rukkie saam met haar gelewe . . ."

Hy sien besorgdheid en iets minder definieerbaar in Hermione se uitdrukking. En toe sy na Ron loer, besef Harry dit is vrees: hy het haar bang gemaak met sy praatjies van saam met dooie mense lewe.

"So daai Peverell-ou wat in Godric's Hollow begrawe is," sê hy vinnig en probeer om heeltemal normaal te klink, "weet jy niks van hom af nie?"

"Nee," antwoord sy en lyk verlig dat hy die onderwerp verander het. "Ek het hom nageslaan ná ek die teken op sy graf gesien het; as hy beroemd was of enigiets belangriks gedoen het, is ek seker hy sou in een van ons boeke gewees het. Die enigste plek waar ek die naam 'Peverell' gekry het, is in *Adellikes van die Aarde: 'n Towenaarstamlys*. Ek het dit by Skepsel geleen," verduidelik sy toe Ron sy wenkbroue lig. "Dit gee 'n lys van die suiwerbloedfamilies wie se manlike geslagslyn nie meer bestaan nie. Blykbaar was die Peverells een van die eerste families wat verdwyn het."

"'Wie se manlike geslagslyn nie meer bestaan nie?'" herhaal Ron.

"Dit beteken die van het uitgesterf," sê Hermione, "in die Peverells se geval eeue gelede. Hulle kan egter nog afstammelinge hê, hulle sal net iets anders genoem word."

En dan skiet dit Harry in 'n wonderlike oomblik van waarheid te binne, die herinnering wat begin roer het ten aanhore van die van Peverell: 'n vieslike ou man wat 'n lelike ring in 'n Ministeriewerker se gesig rondswaai, en hy roep hardop uit: "Marvolo Gaunt!"

"Ekskuus?" vra Ron en Hermione tegelyk.

"*Marvolo Gaunt!* Jy-Weet-Wie se oupa! In die Peinssif! Saam met Dumbledore! Marvolo Gaunt het gesê hy stam van die Peverells af!"

Ron en Hermione lyk verwilderd.

"Die ring, die ring wat die Horcrux geword het: Marvolo Gaunt het gesê die Peverells se familiewapen is daarop! Ek het gesien hoe waai hy dit in die ou van die Ministerie se gesig rond; hy't dit amper in sy neus opgedruk!"

"Die Peverells se familiewapen?" sê Hermione skerp. "Kon jy sien hoe dit lyk?"

"Nie regtig nie," sê Harry en probeer onthou. "Sover ek kon sien, was daar niks besonders op nie; miskien 'n paar skrape. Ek het dit eintlik eers regtig van naby gesien nadat dit oopgebreek is."

Aan die manier waarop Hermione se oë skielik wyer rek, kan Harry sien sy verstaan. Ron kyk van die een na die ander, verstom.

"Demmit . . . Julle dink dit was weer daardie teken? Die teken van die Skatte?"

"Hoekom nie?" sê Harry opgewonde. "Marvolo Gaunt was 'n oningeligte ou blikskottel wat soos 'n vark gelewe het; al wat vir hom saak gemaak het, was sy afkoms. As daardie ring deur die eeue heen oorgeërf is, het hy dalk nie geweet wat dit regtig is nie. Daar was niks boeke in daai huis nie, en glo my, hy was nie die soort wat vir sy kinders sprokies sou gelees het nie. Hy sou maar te graag wou glo die krapmerke op die steen is 'n familiewapen, want wat hom betref, was iemand met suiwer bloed so te sê 'n koninklike."

"Ja . . . en dis alles baie interessant," sê Hermione versigtig, "maar Harry, as jy dink wat ek dink jy dink –"

"Wel, hoekom nie? *Hoekom nie?*" sê Harry, wat alle versigtigheid oorboord gooi. "Dit was 'n steen, was dit nie?" Hy kyk na Ron vir ondersteuning. "Wat as dit die Opstandingsteen was?"

Ron se mond val oop. "Demmit – maar sal dit nog steeds werk as Dumbledore dit gebreek het?"

"Werk? *Werk?* Ron, dit het nooit gewerk nie! *Daar is nie so iets soos 'n Opstandingsteen nie!*" Hermione spring op; sy lyk geïrriteerd en kwaad. "Harry, jy probeer alles by die storie van die Skatte inpas –"

"Probeer alles inpas?" herhaal hy. "Hermione, dit pas vanself in! Ek weet die Skatte van die Dood se teken was op daardie steen! Gaunt het gesê hy stam van die Peverells af!"

"Jy't 'n oomblik gelede vir ons vertel jy't die teken op die steen nooit duidelik gesien nie!"

"Waar dink jy is die ring nou?" vra Ron vir Harry. "Wat het Dumbledore daarmee gedoen nadat hy dit oopgebreek het?"

Maar Harry se verbeelding vlieg vorentoe, ver verby Ron en Hermione s'n . . .

Drie voorwerpe, of Skatte wat, wanneer hulle verenig word, die eie-

maar meester van die Dood sal maak . . . meester . . . veroweraar . . . oorwinnaar . . . die laaste vyand wat verslaan sal word, is die dood . . .

En hy sien homself, die eienaar van die Skatte, van aangesig tot aangesig teenoor Voldemort, wie se Horcruxe nie daarteen opgewasse is nie . . . *Nie een van die twee kan leef terwyl die ander een oorleef nie . . .* Is dit die antwoord hierdie? Skatte teen Horcruxe? Is daar op die ou end tog 'n manier om seker te maak hy is die een wat triomfeer? Sal hy oorleef as hy die Skatte van die Dood se meester is?

"Harry?"

Maar hy hoor Hermione skaars: hy pluk sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel uit en laat dit deur sy vingers gly: die materiaal is soepel soos water, lig soos die lug. Gedurende die byna sewe jaar wat hy in die towerwêreld is, het hy nog nooit enigiets gesien wat daarby kom nie. Die Mantel is presies wat Xenophilius beskryf het: *'n mantel wat die een wat dit dra waarlikwaar totaal onsigbaar maak en vir ewig sal hou, en konstante en ondeurdringbare verborgenheid sal verskaf, ongeag watter towerspreuke daaroor uitgespreek word . . .*

En dan onthou hy met 'n snak –

"Dumbledore het my Mantel gehad, die aand toe my ouers dood is!"

Sy stem bewe en hy voel die kleur in sy gesig, maar hy gee nie om nie. "My ma het vir Sirius vertel Dumbledore het die Mantel geleen! Dis hoekom! Hy wou dit bekyk, want hy't gedink dis die derde Skat! Ignotus Peverell is in Godric's Hollow begrawe . . ." Harry loop blindelings in die tent rond; dit voel of groot nuwe vistas van waarheid oral om hom ontvou. "Hy's my voorvader! Ek stam van die derde broer af! Dit maak alles sin!"

Hy voel gepantser in sekerheid, in sy geloof in die Skatte, asof die blote gedagte daaraan om hulle te besit hom beskerm, en hy voel verheug toe hy na die ander twee toe terugdraai.

"Harry," sê Hermione weer, maar hy is besig om die sakkie om sy nek met bewende vingers los te maak.

"Lees dit," sê hy vir haar en stop sy ma se brief in haar hand. "Lees dit! Dumbledore het die Mantel gehad, Hermione! Hoekom anders sou hy dit wou gehad het? Hy't nie 'n Mantel nodig gehad nie; hy kon sonder een 'n Ontgogelingstowerspreuk uitvoer wat sterk genoeg is om hom heeltemal onsigbaar te maak!"

Iets val op die vloer en rol glinsterend onder 'n stoel in: hy het die Snip uitgelig toe hy die brief uitgehaal het. Hy buk om dit op te tel en dan openbaar die pas ontdekte fontein van fantastiese ontdekkings nog 'n geskenk aan hom, en skok en verwondering ontplof in hom sodat hy uitroep.

"DIS HIERIN! Hy het die ring vir my nagelaat – dis in die Snip!"

"Jy – jy dink so?"

Hy kan nie verstaan hoekom Ron dronkgeslaan lyk nie. Dit is so vanselfsprekend, so duidelik vir Harry: alles pas in, alles . . . sy Mantel is die derde Skat en sodra hy 'n manier kry om die Snip oop te maak sal hy die tweede een hê, en dan moet hy nog net die eerste Skat, die Vlierstaf, in die hande kry, en dan –

Maar dit is asof 'n gordyn voor 'n verligte verhoog toegaan: al sy opwinding, al sy hoop en geluk word in een slag geblus, en hy staan alleen in die donker, en die wonderbaarlike towerspel is verbreek.

"Dis waarna hy soek."

Die verandering in sy stem laat Ron en Hermione selfs nog banger lyk.

"Jy-Weet-Wie wil die Vlierstaf bekom."

Hy draai sy rug op hulle gespanne, ongelowige gesigte. Hy weet dit is die waarheid. Dit maak alles sin. Voldemort soek nie 'n nuwe towerstaf nie; hy soek 'n ou towerstaf, 'n baie, baie ou towerstaf. Harry loop na die tent se ingang en vergeet van Ron en Hermione terwyl hy die nag instaar en diep dink . . .

Voldemort is in 'n Moggelweeshuis grootgemaak. Niemand kon vir hom as kind *Die Verhale van Beedle die Skrywer* vertel het nie, net so min soos wat Harry die stories gehoor het. Bitter min towenaars glo in die Skatte van die Dood. Is dit moontlik dat Voldemort glo hulle bestaan?

Harry tuur die duisternis in . . . As Voldemort van die Skatte van die Dood geweet het, sou hy tog sekerlik daarna gaan soek het, alles moontlik gedoen het om hulle in sy besit te kry: drie voorwerpe wat die eienaar meester van die Dood maak? As hy van die Dood se Skatte geweet het, sou hy dalk in die eerste plek nie Horcruxe nodig gehad het nie. Bewys die eenvoudige feit dat hy 'n Skat geneem en dit in 'n Horcrux verander het, nie dat hy onbewus is van hierdie laaste groot towergeheim nie?

Wat beteken dat Voldemort na die Vlierstaf soek sonder om te besef wat sy volle mag is, sonder om te verstaan dat dit een van die drie is . . . want die towerstaf is die Skat wat nie weggesteek kan word nie, waarvan die bestaan die algemeenste bekend is . . . *die Vlierstaf se bloedspoor loop regdeur ons towergeskiedenis se bladsye . . .*

Harry kyk na die bewolkte lug; rookgrys en silwer wolkkrulle gly oor die wit maan se gesig. Hy voel lighoofdig van verwondering oor wat hy ontdek het.

Hy draai terug in die tent in. Dit is 'n skok om te sien Ron en Hermione staan nog presies waar hy hulle agtergelaat het,

Hermione steeds met Lily se brief in haar hande en Ron, wat effens bekommerd lyk, langs haar. Besef hulle nie hoe ver hulle die afgelope paar minute gevorder het nie?

"Dis die antwoord," sê Harry, wat probeer om hulle by die gloed van sy eie verstommende sekerheid in te trek. "Dit verduidelik alles. Die Skatte van die Dood bestaan, en ek het een – miskien twee –"

Hy hou die Snip in die lug op.

"– en Jy-Weet-Wie is agter die derde een aan, maar hy besef nie . . . Hy dink dis net 'n magtige towerstaf –"

"Harry," sê Hermione, terwyl sy na hom toe beweeg en Lily se brief vir hom teruggee, "ek is jammer, maar ek dink jy's verkeerd, heeltemal verkeerd."

"Maar sien jy nie? Dit pas alles in –"

"Nee, dit pas nie in nie," sê sy. "Dit pas *nie* in nie, Harry, jy raak meegesleur. Asseblief," sê sy toe hy wil begin praat, "antwoord asseblief net hierdie een vraag vir my. As die Skatte van die Dood regtig bestaan en Dumbledore het van hulle geweet, geweet die persoon wat al drie van hulle besit, meester van die Dood sal wees – Harry, hoekom sou hy jou nie daarvan vertel het nie? Hoekom?"

Hy het sy antwoord gereed.

"Jy't dit self gesê, Hermione! 'n Mens moet self van hulle uitvind! Dis 'n Soektog!"

"Ek het dit net gesê om jou te probeer ompraat om na die Lovegoods toe te gaan!" roep Hermione vererg uit. "Ek het dit nie regtig geglo nie!"

Harry steur hom nie aan haar nie.

"Dumbledore het my gewoonlik gelos sodat ek goed self moes uitvind. Hy het dat ek my krag toets, kanse vat. Dit voel soos die soort ding wat hy sou gedoen het."

"Harry, dis nie 'n speletjie dié nie, dis nie 'n oefenlopie nie! Dis die ware Jakob, en Dumbledore het vir jou duidelike instruksies gelos: soek en vernietig die Horcruxe! Daardie simbool beteken niks, vergeet van die Skatte van die Dood, ons kan nie bekostig om van die spoor af te gaan nie –"

Harry luister skaars na haar. Hy draai die Snip om en om in sy hande, en verwag half dit sal oopgaan, die Opstandingsteen openbaar en vir Hermione bewys hy is reg, die Skatte van die Dood bestaan werklik.

Sy wend haar tot Ron.

"Jy glo nie daarin nie, nè?"

Harry kyk op. Ron huiwer.

"Ek weet nie . . . ek bedoel . . . party van die goed pas in," sê Ron

ongemaklik. "Maar as 'n mens na die hele ding kyk . . ." Hy asem diep in. "Ek dink ons is veronderstel om van die Horcruxe ontslae te raak, Harry. Dis wat Dumbledore vir ons gesê het om te doen. Miskien . . . miskien moet ons van hierdie Skatte-besigheid vergeet."

"Dankie, Ron," sê Hermione. "Ek sal eerste wagstaan."

En sy stap verby Harry en gaan sit by die tent se ingang, waarmee sy die gesprek ferm beëindig.

Maar Harry slaap daardie nag omtrent niks nie. Die idee van die Skatte van die Dood het besit van hom geneem en opruiende gedagtes maal deur sy kop: die towerstaf, die steen en die Mantel, as hy hulle al drie net kan besit . . .

Ek ontsluit met die sluiting . . . Maar wat is die sluiting? Hoekom kan hy nie die steen nou hê nie? As hy net die steen kan kry, kan hy hierdie vrae self vir Dumbledore vra . . . en Harry prewel in die donker woorde vir die Snip, probeer alles, selfs Parseltaal, maar die goue balletjie wil nie oopgaan nie . . .

En die towerstaf, die Vlierstaf, waar is dit weggesteek? Waar soek Voldemort nou? Harry wens sy litteken wil brand en vir hom Voldemort se gedagtes wys, want vir die eerste keer ooit is hy en Voldemort verenig in hulle soeke na presies dieselfde ding . . . Hermione sal natuurlik nie van die idee hou nie . . . maar nou ja, sy glo dit bestaan nie . . . Xenophilius was op 'n manier reg . . . *Beperk. Bekrompe. Toekop.* Die waarheid is, die idee van die Skatte van die Dood, veral van die Opstandingsteen, maak haar bang . . . en Harry druk sy mond weer teen die Snip, soen dit, sluk dit amper in, maar die koue metaal reageer nie . . .

Dit is al amper dagbreek toe hy onthou van Luna, alleen in 'n sel in Azkaban, omring deur Dementors, en hy skaam hom skielik vir homself. Met al sy vurige bespiegelinge oor die Skatte het hy heeltemal van haar vergeet. As hulle haar net kan red, maar dit is feitlik onmoontlik om soveel Dementors saam aan te durf. Hy dink skielik daaraan dat hy nog nie 'n Patronus met die swartdoringstaf probeer optower het nie . . . Hy moet môreoggend probeer . . .

As daar net 'n manier is om 'n beter towerstaf te kry . . .

En begeerte na die Vlierstaf, die Doodstok, onoorwinlik, onoortreflik, neem weer eens besit van hom . . .

Hulle vou die tent die volgende oggend op en vertrek in 'n trietsige reënbui. Die reën volg hulle na die kus toe, waar hulle die tent daardie aand opslaan, en hou dwarsdeur die week aan, deur deurweekte landskappe wat Harry guur en terneerdrukkend vind . Al waaraan hy kan dink, is die Skatte van die Dood. Dit is asof daar 'n vlam in hom aangesteek is wat niks kan blus nie, nie Hermione se

volstrekte ongeloof of Ron se volgehoue twyfel nie. En nogtans, hoe vuriger die hunkering na die Skatte binne-in hom brand, hoe minder gelukkig maak dit hom. Hy blameer Ron en Hermione: hulle vasberade onverskilligheid demp sy geesdrif net so erg soos die meedoënlose reën, maar dit kan nie sy sekerheid wegvreet nie; dit bly absoluut. Harry se geloof in en hunkering na die Skatte verteer hom in so 'n mate dat hy heeltemal afgesonder voel van die ander twee en hulle obsessie met die Horcruxe.

"Obsessie?" sê Hermione in 'n lae, kwaai stem toe Harry een aand roekeloos genoeg is om die woord te gebruik nadat Hermione hom berispe het oor sy gebrek aan belangstelling om nog Horcruxe op te spoor. "Dis nie ons wat 'n obsessie het nie, Harry! Ons probeer doen wat Dumbledore wou hê ons moet doen!"

Maar hy steur hom nie aan haar versluierde kritiek nie. Dumbledore het die teken van die Skatte vir Hermione nagelaat om te ontsyfer en verder het hy, Harry bly oortuig hiervan, die Opstandingsteen in die goue Snip versteek. *Nie een van die twee kan leef terwyl die ander een oorleef nie . . . meester van die dood . . .* hoekom verstaan Ron en Hermione dit nie?

"'*Die laaste vyand wat verslaan sal word, is die dood*'," haal Harry kalm aan.

"Ek dog ons is veronderstel om teen Jy-Weet-Wie te veg," kap Hermione terug en Harry gee moed op met haar.

Selfs die raaisel van die takbokooi, wat die ander twee aanhoudend bespreek, voel nou vir Harry minder belangrik, net 'n vae interessante bysaak. Die enigste ander ding wat vir hom saak maak, is dat sy litteken weer begin prik het, hoewel hy alles in sy vermoë doen om dit vir die ander twee weg te steek. Hy sonder hom af wanneer dit gebeur, maar is teleurgesteld met wat hy sien. Die kwaliteit van die beelde wat hy en Voldemort deel, het verander: hulle het wasig geword en verskuif asof hulle in en uit fokus beweeg. Harry kon net die onduidelike buitelyne van 'n ding wat soos 'n skedel lyk, uitmaak, en iets soos 'n berg wat meer skaduwee as substansie is. Harry is gewoond aan beelde wat so skerp soos die werklikheid is en vind hierdie verandering onthutsend. Hy is bekommerd dat die verbintenis tussen hom en Voldemort beskadig is; dit is 'n verbintenis wat hy tegelyk vrees en hoogskat, ten spyte van wat hy vir Hermione gesê het. Harry verbind hierdie onbevredigende, vae beelde op 'n manier met sy towerstaf wat gebreek is, asof dit die swartdoringstaf se skuld is dat hy nie meer so duidelik soos voorheen kan sien wat in Voldemort se kop aangaan nie.

Soos die weke verbydraal, kan Harry, al is hy nou ook so selfbe-

hep, nie help om op te merk dat Ron die leiding begin oorneem nie. Miskien omdat hy vasberade is om te vergoed vir die feit dat hy hulle in die steek gelaat het, miskien omdat Harry se wegsinking in lusteloosheid sy sluimerende leierseienskappe na vore bring, is Ron nou die een wat die ander twee tot optrede aanmoedig en aanhits.

"Daar's drie Horcruxe oor," sê hy herhaaldelik. "Ons het 'n plan van aksie nodig, komaan! Waaraan het ons nog nie gedink nie? Kom ons gaan weer deur al die plekke. Die weeshuis . . ."

Diagonaalstraat, Hogwarts, die Riddle-huis, Borgin en Burkes, Albanië, elke plek waar hulle weet Tom Riddle ooit gebly of gewerk, gekuier of iemand vermoor het: Ron en Hermione rakel hulle almal weer op en Harry doen mee sodat Hermione kan ophou om hom te verpes. Hy sou verkies het om alleen in stilte te sit en Voldemort se gedagtes te probeer lees, of meer oor die Vlierstaf uit te vind, maar Ron dring daarop aan om na selfs nog meer onwaarskynlike plekke te reis, en Harry weet dit is eenvoudig om hulle aan die beweeg te hou.

" 'n Mens weet nooit," is Ron se konstante refrein, "Upper Flagley is 'n towenaarsdorp; hy mag dalk daar gaan woon het. Kom ons gaan kyk daar rond."

Hierdie gereelde uitstappies na towergebiede beteken dat hulle af en toe op Grypers afkom.

"Party van hulle is glo so erg soos Doodseters," sê Ron. "Die spul wat my beetgehad het, was bietjie pateties, maar Bill dink party van hulle is vrek gevaarlik. Hulle sê op *Potterparade* –"

"Op wat?" sê Harry.

"*Potterparade*. Het ek jou nie vertel dis wat dit genoem word nie? Die program wat ek heeltyd op die radio probeer kry, die enigste een wat die waarheid vertel oor wat aangaan! Amper al die programme dans na Jy-Weet-Wie se pype, almal behalwe *Potterparade*. Ek wil regtig hê jy moet dit hoor, maar dis moeilik om daarop in te skakel . . ."

Ron verwyl aand na aand deur met sy towerstaf verskillende ritmes bo-op die radio te trommel terwyl die wysters ronddans. Nou en dan vang hulle grepies advies op oor hoe om draakpokke te behandel en eenkeer 'n paar akkoorde van " 'n Ketel Stomende Sterk Liefde". Terwyl hy trommel, probeer Ron heeltyd die regte kodewoord kry deur lukraak stringe woorde wat by hom opkom, te prewel.

"Dit het gewoonlik iets met die Orde te doen," sê hy vir hulle. "Bill verstaan die kuns om te raai wat dit is. Ek moet een of ander tyd die regte een kry . . ."

Maar eers in Maart is dit Ron beskore. Harry sit in die tentopening op wag en staar ledig na 'n tros druifhiasinte wat vir hulle 'n pad deur die ysige grond gebaan het toe Ron opgewonde van binne uit die tent uitroep.

"Ek het dit, ek het dit! Die kodewoord was 'Albus'! Kom in binnetoe, Harry!"

Harry word die eerste keer in dae wakker geskud uit sy bespiegelinge oor die Skatte van die Dood en gaan haastig by die tent in waar hy Ron en Hermione knielend op die vloer langs die klein radio'tjie aantref. Hermione, wat Gryffindor se swaard blink gevryf het net om iets te doen, staar oopmond na die klein luidspreker waaruit daar 'n baie bekende stem kom.

". . . vra verskoning vir ons tydelike afwesigheid van die lug, wat te wyte was aan 'n paar huisbesoeke in ons gebied deur die sjarmante Doodseters."

"Maar dis Lee Jordan!" sê Hermione.

"Ek weet!" sê Ron stralend. "Oulik, nè?"

". . . nou vir ons 'n ander veilige plek gekry," gaan Lee voort, "en ek is bly om vir julle te kan sê twee van ons gereelde medewerkers is vanaand hier by my. Naandsê, manne!"

"Haai."

"Naand, Rivier."

"'Rivier', dis Lee," verduidelik Ron. "Hulle het almal kodename, maar 'n mens kan gewoonlik uitmaak –"

"Sjuut!" sê Hermione.

"Maar voor ons van Rojaal en Romulus hoor," vervolg Lee, "kom ons wy eers 'n oomblik daaraan om die sterftes aan te kondig wat die *Towenaarsdraadloos* se *Netwerknuus* en die *Daaglikse Profeet* nie belangrik genoeg ag om te noem nie. Dit is met groot leedwese dat ons ons luisteraars inlig van die moorde op Ted Tonks en Dirk Creswell."

Harry kry 'n aaklige hol kol op sy maag. Hy, Ron en Hermione staar geskok na mekaar.

"'n Kabouter genaamd Gornuk is ook vermoor. Daar word gemeen dat die Moggelgebore Dean Thomas en 'n tweede kabouter, wat albei glo saam met Tonks, Creswell en Gornuk gereis het, dalk ontsnap het. As Dean luister, of as enigiemand 'n idee het waar hy hom bevind, sy ouers en susters is desperaat vir nuus.

"Intussen is 'n Moggelgesin van vyf dood aangetref in hulle huis in Gaddley. Die Moggelowerheid skryf die sterftes aan 'n gaslekkasie toe, maar lede van die Orde van die Feniks het my in kennis gestel dat dit die Moordvloek is – verdere bewys, asof dit nodig is, vir die

feit dat Moggelslagting onder die nuwe regime byna 'n ontspanningsport word.

"Laastens moet ons ons luisteraars tot ons spyt inlig dat Bathilda Bagshot se oorskot in Godric's Hollow ontdek is. Alles dui daarop dat sy etlike maande gelede oorlede is. Volgens die Orde van die Feniks toon haar liggaam onmiskenbare tekens van beserings wat deur Donker Towerkuns toegedien is.

"Luisteraars, ek vra julle nou om by ons aan te sluit vir 'n minuut van stilte ter nagedagtenis aan Ted Tonks, Dirk Creswell, Bathilda Bagshot, Gornuk en die onbekende, maar nietemin betreurde, Moggels wat deur die Doodseters vermoor is."

Daar daal stilte neer, en Harry, Ron en Hermione praat nie. Die een helfte van Harry smag daarna om meer te hoor, die ander helfte van hom is bang vir wat volgende kan kom. Dit is die eerste keer in 'n lang tyd dat hy voel hy is ten volle in kontak met die buitewêreld.

"Dankie," sê Lee se stem. "En nou oor na ons gereelde medewerker, Rojaal, wat ons op hoogte gaan bring van hoe die nuwe towerorde die Moggelwêreld raak."

"Dankie, Rivier," sê 'n onmiskenbare stem, diep, afgemete, gerusstellend.

"Kingsley!" bars Ron uit.

"Ons weet!" maak Hermione hom stil.

"Moggels bly onbewus van die bron van hulle lyding terwyl hulle steeds swaar verliese ly," sê Kingsley. "Ons hoor egter nog deurgaans waarlik inspirerende stories van towenaars en hekse wat hulle eie veiligheid op die spel plaas ten einde Moggelvriende en -bure te help, dikwels sonder die Moggels se medewete. Ek wil graag 'n beroep op al ons luisteraars doen om hierdie voorbeeld na te volg, miskien deur 'n beskermende paljas oor enige Moggeltuistes in jou straat uit te spreek. Baie lewens kan gespaar word as sulke eenvoudige stappe gedoen word."

"En Rojaal, wat sal jou antwoord wees op daardie luisteraars wat sê hulle glo in hierdie gevaarlike tye in 'towenaars eerste'?" vra Lee.

"Ek sou sê dit is een kort stappie van 'towenaars eerste' na 'suiwerbloede eerste' en dan na 'Doodseters'," antwoord Kingsley. "Ons is almal mense, of hoe? Elke menslike lewe is ewe veel werd, en werd om gered te word."

"Dis uitstekend gestel, Rojaal, en jy't my stem vir Minister van Towerkuns as ons ooit uit hierdie gemors kom," sê Lee. "En nou, oor na Romulus vir ons gewilde rubriek: Pelle van Potter."

"Dankie, Rivier," sê nog 'n baie bekende stem; Ron begin praat, maar Hermione spring hom fluisterend voor.

"Ons weet dis Lupin!"

"Romulus, hou jy vol, soos al die vorige kere dat jy op hierdie program was, dat Harry Potter steeds lewe?

"Beslis," sê Lupin ferm. "Daar bestaan by my geen twyfel nie dat die Doodseters sy dood so wyd moontlik sal verkondig as dit sou gebeur, want dit sal 'n dodelike slag wees vir diegene wat weerstand teen die nuwe regime bied. Die 'Seun Wat Bly Leef Het' bly 'n simbool van alles waarvoor ons veg: die oorwinning van die goeie, die mag van onskuld, die noodsaak om steeds weerstand te bied."

'n Mengsel van dankbaarheid en skaamte wel in Harry op. Het Lupin hom dan vergewe vir die vreeslike dinge wat hy gesê het toe hulle laas saam was?

"En wat sal jy vir Harry sê as hy dalk nou inluister, Romulus?"

"Ek sal vir hom sê ons is almal in die gees met hom," sê Lupin en huiwer dan effens. "En ek sal vir hom sê hy moet sy instink volg, want dit is goed en amper altyd reg."

Harry kyk na Hermione wie se oë vol trane is.

"Amper altyd reg," herhaal sy.

"O, het ek julle nie vertel nie?" sê Ron verras. "Bill het vir my gesê Lupin woon weer saam met Tonks! En blykbaar raak sy nou nogal groot ook."

". . . en soos gewoonlik die jongste nuus oor daardie vriende van Harry Potter wat ly omdat hulle hom steun," sê Lee.

"Wel, soos gereelde luisteraars sal weet, is verskeie meer uitgesproke Harry Potter-ondersteuners nou gevange geneem, insluitende Xenophilius Lovegood, voormalige redakteur van *Die Vitter* –" sê Lupin.

"Ten minste lewe hy nog!" prewel Ron.

"Ons het ook die afgelope paar uur gehoor Rubeus Hagrid –" hulle al drie snak na asem en mis gevolglik amper die res van die sin, "– bekende wildwagter by Hogwarts Skool, het naelskraap arres vrygespring op Hogwarts se terrein, waar hy volgens gerugte 'n 'Ondersteun Harry Potter'-partytjie in sy huis gehou het. Hagrid is egter nie in hegtenis geneem nie en is sover ons weet 'n voortvlugtige."

"Ek veronderstel dit help jou om van die Doodseters te ontsnap as jy 'n sestien voet lang halfbroer het?" vra Lee.

"Dit behoort jou 'n voordeel te gee, ja," stem Lupin ernstig saam. "Mag ek net byvoeg dat terwyl ons hier op *Potterparade* Hagrid se moed bewonder, ons selfs Harry se mees toegewyde ondersteuners ten sterkste afraai om Hagrid se voorbeeld te volg. 'Ondersteun Harry Potter'-partytjies is onwys in die huidige klimaat."

"Inderdaad, Romulus," sê Lee, "so ons stel voor julle hou aan om julle toewyding aan die man met die weerliglitteken te toon deur na *Potterparade* te luister! En kom ons beweeg nou aan na nuus oor die towenaar wat net so glibberig soos Harry Potter blyk te wees. Ons hou daarvan om na hom te verwys as die Hoofdoodseter, en hier om sy mening te gee oor sommige van die meer waansinnige gerugte wat die ronde doen oor hom, is 'n nuwe medewerker wat ek aan julle gaan voorstel as Rot."

"'*Rot?*'" sê nog 'n bekende stem, en Harry, Ron en Hermione roep saam uit: "Fred!"

"Nee – is dit George?"

"Dis Fred, dink ek," sê Ron, wat nader leun terwyl watter een van die tweeling dit ook al is, sê: "Ek gaan nie Rot wees nie, vergeet dit, ek het vir jou gesê ek wil Rapier wees!"

"O, nou goed dan. Rapier, kan jy asseblief vir ons jou siening gee oor die verskillende stories wat ons oor die Hoofdoodseter hoor?"

"Ja, Rivier, ek kan," sê Fred. "Soos ons luisteraars sal weet, tensy hulle hul toevlug tot die bodem van 'n tuindammetjie of iets van dié aard geneem het, skep Jy-Weet-Wie se strategie om in die skaduwees te bly 'n lekker klimaat van paniek. Terloops, as daar waarheid steek in al die bewerings van waar hy gesien is, moet daar minstens negentien Jy-Weet-Wies wees wat die wêreld vol rondhardloop."

"Wat hom natuurlik pas," sê Kingsley. "Die atmosfeer van misterie skep meer angs as 'n werklike verskyning van hom."

"Ek stem saam," sê Fred. "So, mense, kom ons probeer 'n bietjie rustiger raak. Dinge is erg genoeg sonder dat ons boonop stories opmaak, soos byvoorbeeld hierdie nuwe idee dat Jy-Weet-Wie iemand met een kyk kan vermoor. Dis 'n *Basilisk*, luisteraars. Volg hierdie eenvoudige toets: kyk of die ding wat jou aangluur bene het. As dit het, is dit veilig om in sy oë te kyk, alhoewel, as dit regtig Jy-Weet-Wie is, sal dit nog steeds waarskynlik die laaste ding wees wat jy ooit doen."

Dis is die eerste keer in weke en weke dat Harry lag: hy voel die gewig van al die spanning uit hom vloei.

"En die gerugte dat hy heeltyd oorsee gesien word?" vra Lee.

"Wel, wie sal nie lus wees vir 'n lekker vakansie ná al die harde werk wat hy gedoen het nie?" vra Fred. "Die punt is, mense, moenie gesus word deur 'n vals gevoel van veiligheid omdat julle dink hy's landuit nie. Miskien is hy, miskien is hy nie, maar feit bly staan: as hy wil, kan hy vinniger beweeg as Severus Snape wat met sjampoe gekonfronteer word, so moenie daarop reken dat hy ver weg is as julle beplan om enige kanse te waag nie. Ek het nooit gedink ek sal myself dit hoor sê nie, maar veiligheid eerste!"

"Baie dankie vir daardie wyse woorde, Rapier," sê Lee. "Luisteraars, dit bring ons aan die einde van nog 'n *Potterparade*. Ons weet nie wanneer dit weer moontlik sal wees om uit te saai nie, maar weet verseker, ons sal weer terug wees. Hou aan om daai wysters te draai: die volgende kodewoord sal 'Maloog' wees. Hou mekaar veilig en hou moed. Goeienag."

Die radio se wyster draai in die rondte en die ligte agter die instelpaneel gaan dood. Harry, Ron en Hermione straal nog steeds. Dit is 'n buitengewone tonikum om bekende, vriendelike stemme te hoor; Harry het al so gewoond geraak aan hulle isolasie dat hy amper vergeet het daar is ander mense wat hulle ook teen Voldemort verset. Dit is soos om uit 'n lang slaap wakker te word.

"Goed, hè?" vra Ron vrolik.

"Briljant," sê Harry.

"Dis so dapper van hulle," sug Hermione met bewondering. "As hulle gevang word . . ."

"Wel, hulle bly aan die beweeg, of hoe?" sê Ron. "Nes ons."

"Maar het julle gehoor wat sê Fred?" vra Harry opgewonde. Noudat die uitsending verby is, keer sy gedagtes weer terug na sy allesverterende obsessie. "Hy's oorsee! Hy soek na die towerstaf, ek het dit geweet!"

"Harry –"

"Komaan, Hermione, hoekom wil jy dit nie erken nie? Vol–"

"HARRY, NEE!"

"–demort is agter die Vlierstaf aan!"

"Daai naam is Taboe!" brul Ron en spring op toe daar 'n harde *kraak* buite die tent is. "Ek het jou gesê, Harry, ek het jou gesê, ons kan dit nie meer sê nie – ons moet die beskerming weer om ons terugsit – gou – dis hoe hulle 'n mens opspoor –"

Maar Ron hou op praat en Harry weet hoekom. Die Loerskoop op die tafel het verhelder en begin draai; hulle hoor stemme wat al nader en nader kom: growwe, opgewonde stemme. Ron pluk die Afskakelaar uit sy sak en klik dit: hulle lampe gaan dood.

"Kom uit daar met julle hande bo julle koppe!" roep 'n kraakstem deur die donker. "Ons weet julle's daarbinne! Daar's 'n halfdosyn towerstawwe op julle gerig en ons gee nie om wie ons vloeke tref nie!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



MALFOY MANOR

Harry looked around at the other two, now mere outlines in the darkness. He saw Hermione point her wand, not toward the outside, but into his face; there was a bang, a burst of white light, and he buckled in agony, unable to see. He could feel his face swelling rapidly under his hands as heavy footfalls surrounded him.

"Get up, vermin."

Unknown hands dragged Harry roughly off the ground. Before he could stop them, someone had rummaged through his pockets and removed the blackthorn wand. Harry clutched at his excruciatingly painful face, which felt unrecognizable beneath his fingers, tight, swollen, and puffy as though he had suffered some violent allergic

reaction. His eyes had been reduced to slits through which he could barely see; his glasses fell off as he was bundled out of the tent; all he could make out were the blurred shapes of four or five people wrestling Ron and Hermione outside too.

"Get — off — her!" Ron shouted. There was the unmistakable sound of knuckles hitting flesh: Ron grunted in pain and Hermione screamed, "No! Leave him alone, leave him alone!"

"Your boyfriend's going to have worse than that done to him if he's on my list," said the horribly familiar, rasping voice. "Delicious girl . . . What a treat . . . I do enjoy the softness of the skin. . . ."

Harry's stomach turned over. He knew who this was: Fenrir Greyback, the werewolf who was permitted to wear Death Eater robes in return for his hired savagery.

"Search the tent!" said another voice.

Harry was thrown facedown onto the ground. A thud told him that Ron had been cast down beside him. They could hear footsteps and crashes; the men were pushing over chairs inside the tent as they searched.

"Now, let's see who we've got," said Greyback's gloating voice from overhead, and Harry was rolled over onto his back. A beam of wandlight fell into his face and Greyback laughed.

"I'll be needing butterbeer to wash this one down. What happened to you, ugly?"

Harry did not answer immediately.

"I *said*," repeated Greyback, and Harry received a blow to the diaphragm that made him double over in pain, "what happened to you?"

"Stung," Harry muttered. "Been stung."

"Yeah, looks like it," said a second voice.

"What's your name?" snarled Greyback.

"Dudley," said Harry.

"And your first name?"

"I — Vernon. Vernon Dudley."

"Check the list, Scabior," said Greyback, and Harry heard him move sideways to look down at Ron, instead. "And what about you, ginger?"

"Stan Shunpike," said Ron.

"Like 'ell you are," said the man called Scabior. "We know Stan Shunpike, 'e's put a bit of work our way."

There was another thud.

"I'b Bardy," said Ron, and Harry could tell that his mouth was full of blood. "Bardy Weadley."

"A Weasley?" rasped Greyback. "So you're related to blood traitors even if you're not a Mudblood. And lastly, your pretty little friend . . ." The relish in his voice made Harry's flesh crawl.

"Easy, Greyback," said Scabior over the jeering of the others.

"Oh, I'm not going to bite just yet. We'll see if she's a bit quicker at remembering her name than Barny. Who are you, girly?"

"Penelope Clearwater," said Hermione. She sounded terrified, but convincing.

"What's your blood status?"

"Half-blood," said Hermione.

"Easy enough to check," said Scabior. "But the 'ole lot of 'em look

like they could still be ’ogwarts age —”

“We’b lebt,” said Ron.

“Left, ’ave you, ginger?” said Scabior. “And you decided to go camping? And you thought, just for a laugh, you’d use the Dark Lord’s name?”

“Nod a laugh,” said Ron. “Aggiden.”

“Accident?” There was more jeering laughter.

“You know who used to like using the Dark Lord’s name, Weasley?” growled Greyback. “The Order of the Phoenix. Mean anything to you?”

“Doh.”

“Well, they don’t show the Dark Lord proper respect, so the name’s been Tabooed. A few Order members have been tracked that way. We’ll see. Bind them up with the other two prisoners!”

Someone yanked Harry up by the hair, dragged him a short way, pushed him down into a sitting position, then started binding him back-to-back with other people. Harry was still half blind, barely able to see anything through his puffed-up eyes. When at last the man tying them had walked away, Harry whispered to the other prisoners.

“Anyone still got a wand?”

“No,” said Ron and Hermione from either side of him.

“This is all my fault. I said the name, I’m sorry —”

“Harry?”

It was a new, but familiar, voice, and it came from directly behind Harry, from the person tied to Hermione’s left.

“Dean?”

"It *is* you! If they find out who they've got — ! They're Snatchers, they're only looking for truants to sell for gold —"

"Not a bad little haul for one night," Greyback was saying, as a pair of hobnailed boots marched close by Harry and they heard more crashes from inside the tent. "A Mudblood, a runaway goblin, and three truants. You checked their names on the list yet, Scabior?" he roared.

"Yeah. There's no Vernon Dudley on 'ere, Greyback."

"Interesting," said Greyback. "That's interesting."

He crouched down beside Harry, who saw, through the infinitesimal gap left between his swollen eyelids, a face covered in matted gray hair and whiskers, with pointed brown teeth and sores at the corners of his mouth. Greyback smelled as he had done at the top of the tower where Dumbledore had died: of dirt, sweat, and blood.

"So you aren't wanted, then, Vernon? Or are you on that list under a different name? What House were you in at Hogwarts?"

"Slytherin," said Harry automatically.

"Funny 'ow they all thinks we wants to 'ear that," jeered Scabior out of the shadows. "But none of 'em can tell us where the common room is."

"It's in the dungeons," said Harry clearly. "You enter through the wall. It's full of skulls and stuff and it's under the lake, so the light's all green."

There was a short pause.

"Well, well, looks like we really 'ave caught a little Slytherin," said Scabior. "Good for you, Vernon, 'cause there ain't a lot of Mudblood Slytherins. Who's your father?"

"He works at the Ministry," Harry lied. He knew that his whole story would collapse with the smallest investigation, but on the other hand, he only had until his face regained its usual appearance before the game was up in any case. "Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes."

"You know what, Greyback," said Scabior. "I think there *is* a Dudley in there."

Harry could barely breathe: Could luck, sheer luck, get them safely out of this?

"Well, well," said Greyback, and Harry could hear the tiniest note of trepidation in that callous voice, and knew that Greyback was wondering whether he had indeed just attacked and bound the son of a Ministry official. Harry's heart was pounding against the ropes around his ribs; he would not have been surprised to know that Greyback could see it. "If you're telling the truth, ugly, you've got nothing to fear from a trip to the Ministry. I expect your father'll reward us just for picking you up."

"But," said Harry, his mouth bone dry, "if you just let us —"

"Hey!" came a shout from inside the tent. "Look at this, Greyback!"

A dark figure came bustling toward them, and Harry saw a glint of silver in the light of their wands. They had found Gryffindor's sword.

"Ve-e-ry nice," said Greyback appreciatively, taking it from his companion. "Oh, very nice indeed. Looks goblin-made, that. Where did you get something like this?"

"It's my father's," Harry lied, hoping against hope that it was too dark for Greyback to see the name etched just below the hilt. "We

borrowed it to cut firewood —"

"'ang on a minute, Greyback! Look at this, in the *Prophet*!"

As Scabior said it, Harry's scar, which was stretched tight across his distended forehead, burned savagely. More clearly than he could make out anything around him, he saw a towering building, a grim fortress, jet-black and forbidding; Voldemort's thoughts had suddenly become razor-sharp again; he was gliding toward the gigantic building with a sense of calmly euphoric purpose. . . .

So close . . . So close . . .

With a huge effort of will Harry closed his mind to Voldemort's thoughts, pulling himself back to where he sat, tied to Ron, Hermione, Dean, and Griphook in the darkness, listening to Greyback and Scabior.

"''ermione Granger,'" Scabior was saying, *"'the Mudblood who is known to be traveling with 'arry Potter.'"*

Harry's scar burned in the silence, but he made a supreme effort to keep himself present, not to slip into Voldemort's mind. He heard the creak of Greyback's boots as he crouched down in front of Hermione.

"You know what, little girly? This picture looks a hell of a lot like you."

"It isn't! It isn't me!"

Hermione's terrified squeak was as good as a confession.

"' . . . known to be traveling with Harry Potter,'" repeated Greyback quietly.

A stillness had settled over the scene. Harry's scar was exquisitely painful, but he struggled with all his strength against the pull of

Voldemort's thoughts: It had never been so important to remain in his own right mind.

"Well, this changes things, doesn't it?" whispered Greyback. Nobody spoke: Harry sensed the gang of Snatchers watching, frozen, and felt Hermione's arm trembling against his. Greyback got up and took a couple of steps to where Harry sat, crouching down again to stare closely at his misshapen features.

"What's that on your forehead, Vernon?" he asked softly, his breath foul in Harry's nostrils as he pressed a filthy finger to the taut scar.

"Don't touch it!" Harry yelled; he could not stop himself; he thought he might be sick from the pain of it.

"I thought you wore glasses, Potter?" breathed Greyback.

"I found glasses!" yelped one of the Snatchers skulking in the background. "There was glasses in the tent, Greyback, wait —"

And seconds later Harry's glasses had been rammed back onto his face. The Snatchers were closing in now, peering at him.

"It is!" rasped Greyback. "We've caught Potter!"

They all took several steps backward, stunned by what they had done. Harry, still fighting to remain present inside his own splitting head, could think of nothing to say: Fragmented visions were breaking across the surface of his mind —

— *He was gliding around the high walls of the black fortress* —

No, he was Harry, tied up and wandless, in grave danger —

— *looking up, up to the topmost window, the highest tower* —

He was Harry, and they were discussing his fate in low voices —

— *Time to fly* . . .

". . . to the Ministry?"

"To hell with the Ministry," growled Greyback. "They'll take the credit, and we won't get a look in. I say we take him straight to You-Know-Who."

"Will you summon 'im? *'ere?*" said Scabior, sounding awed, terrified.

"No," snarled Greyback, "I haven't got — they say he's using the Malfoys' place as a base. We'll take the boy there."

Harry thought he knew why Greyback was not calling Voldemort. The werewolf might be allowed to wear Death Eater robes when they wanted to use him, but only Voldemort's inner circle were branded with the Dark Mark: Greyback had not been granted this highest honor.

Harry's scar seared again —

— *and he rose into the night, flying straight up to the window at the very top of the tower —*

". . . completely sure it's him? 'Cause if it ain't, Greyback, we're dead."

"Who's in charge here?" roared Greyback, covering his moment of inadequacy. "I say that's Potter, and him plus his wand, that's two hundred thousand Galleons right there! But if you're too gutless to come along, any of you, it's all for me, and with any luck, I'll get the girl thrown in!"

— *The window was the merest slit in the black rock, not big enough for a man to enter. . . . A skeletal figure was just visible through it, curled beneath a blanket. . . . Dead, or sleeping . . . ?*

"All right!" said Scabior. "All right, we're in! And what about the

rest of 'em, Greyback, what'll we do with 'em?"

"Might as well take the lot. We've got two Mudbloods, that's another ten Galleons. Give me the sword as well. If they're rubies, that's another small fortune right there."

The prisoners were dragged to their feet. Harry could hear Hermione's breathing, fast and terrified.

"Grab hold and make it tight. I'll do Potter!" said Greyback, seizing a fistful of Harry's hair; Harry could feel his long yellow nails scratching his scalp. "On three! One — two — three —"

They Disapparated, pulling the prisoners with them. Harry struggled, trying to throw off Greyback's hand, but it was hopeless: Ron and Hermione were squeezed tightly against him on either side, he could not separate from the group, and as the breath was squeezed out of him his scar seared more painfully still —

— as he forced himself through the slit of a window like a snake and landed, lightly as vapor, inside the cell-like room —

The prisoners lurched into one another as they landed in a country lane. Harry's eyes, still puffy, took a moment to acclimatize, then he saw a pair of wrought-iron gates at the foot of what looked like a long drive. He experienced the tiniest trickle of relief. The worst had not happened yet: Voldemort was not here. He was, Harry knew, for he was fighting to resist the vision, in some strange, fortresslike place, at the top of a tower. How long it would take Voldemort to get to this place, once he knew that Harry was here, was another matter. . . .

One of the Snatchers strode to the gates and shook them.

"How do we get in? They're locked, Greyback, I can't —

blimey!"

He whipped his hands away in fright. The iron was contorting, twisting itself out of the abstract furls and coils into a frightening face, which spoke in a clanging, echoing voice: "State your purpose!"

"We've got Potter!" Greyback roared triumphantly. "We've captured Harry Potter!"

The gates swung open.

"Come on!" said Greyback to his men, and the prisoners were shunted through the gates and up the drive, between high hedges that muffled their footsteps. Harry saw a ghostly white shape above him, and realized it was an albino peacock. He stumbled and was dragged onto his feet by Greyback; now he was staggering along sideways, tied back-to-back to the four other prisoners. Closing his puffy eyes, he allowed the pain in his scar to overcome him for a moment, wanting to know what Voldemort was doing, whether he knew yet that Harry was caught. . . .

The emaciated figure stirred beneath its thin blanket and rolled over toward him, eyes opening in a skull of a face. . . . The frail man sat up, great sunken eyes fixed upon him, upon Voldemort, and then he smiled. Most of his teeth were gone. . . .

"So, you have come. I thought you would . . . one day. But your journey was pointless. I never had it."

"You lie!"

As Voldemort's anger throbbed inside him, Harry's scar threatened to burst with pain, and he wrenched his mind back to his own body, fighting to remain present as the prisoners were pushed over gravel.

Light spilled out over all of them.

"What is this?" said a woman's cold voice.

"We're here to see He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!" rasped Greyback.

"Who are you?"

"You know me!" There was resentment in the werewolf's voice. "Fenrir Greyback! We've caught Harry Potter!"

Greyback seized Harry and dragged him around to face the light, forcing the other prisoners to shuffle around too.

"I know 'e's swollen, ma'am, but it's 'im!" piped up Scabior. "If you look a bit closer, you'll see 'is scar. And this 'ere, see the girl? The Mudblood who's been traveling around with 'im, ma'am. There's no doubt it's 'im, and we've got 'is wand as well! 'Ere, ma'am —"

Through his puffy eyelids Harry saw Narcissa Malfoy scrutinizing his swollen face. Scabior thrust the blackthorn wand at her. She raised her eyebrows.

"Bring them in," she said.

Harry and the others were shoved and kicked up broad stone steps into a hallway lined with portraits.

"Follow me," said Narcissa, leading the way across the hall. "My son, Draco, is home for his Easter holidays. If that is Harry Potter, he will know."

The drawing room dazzled after the darkness outside; even with his eyes almost closed Harry could make out the wide proportions of the room. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, more portraits against the dark purple walls. Two figures rose from chairs in front

of an ornate marble fireplace as the prisoners were forced into the room by the Snatchers.

"What is this?"

The dreadfully familiar, drawling voice of Lucius Malfoy fell on Harry's ears. He was panicking now: He could see no way out, and it was easier, as his fear mounted, to block out Voldemort's thoughts, though his scar was still burning.

"They say they've got Potter," said Narcissa's cold voice. "Draco, come here."

Harry did not dare look directly at Draco, but saw him obliquely: a figure slightly taller than he was, rising from an armchair, his face a pale and pointed blur beneath white-blond hair.

Greyback forced the prisoners to turn again so as to place Harry directly beneath the chandelier.

"Well, boy?" rasped the werewolf.

Harry was facing a mirror over the fireplace, a great gilded thing in an intricately scrolled frame. Through the slits of his eyes he saw his own reflection for the first time since leaving Grimmauld Place.

His face was huge, shiny, and pink, every feature distorted by Hermione's jinx. His black hair reached his shoulders and there was a dark shadow around his jaw. Had he not known that it was he who stood there, he would have wondered who was wearing his glasses. He resolved not to speak, for his voice was sure to give him away; yet he still avoided eye contact with Draco as the latter approached.

"Well, Draco?" said Lucius Malfoy. He sounded avid. "Is it? Is it Harry Potter?"

"I can't — I can't be sure," said Draco. He was keeping his

distance from Greyback, and seemed as scared of looking at Harry as Harry was of looking at him.

"But look at him carefully, look! Come closer!"

Harry had never heard Lucius Malfoy so excited.

"Draco, if we are the ones who hand Potter over to the Dark Lord, everything will be forgiv —"

"Now, we won't be forgetting who actually caught him, I hope, Mr. Malfoy?" said Greyback menacingly.

"Of course not, of course not!" said Lucius impatiently. He approached Harry himself, came so close that Harry could see the usually languid, pale face in sharp detail even through his swollen eyes. With his face a puffy mask, Harry felt as though he was peering out from between the bars of a cage.

"What did you do to him?" Lucius asked Greyback. "How did he get into this state?"

"That wasn't us."

"Looks more like a Stinging Jinx to me," said Lucius.

His gray eyes raked Harry's forehead.

"There's something there," he whispered, "it could be the scar, stretched tight. . . . Draco, come here, look properly! What do you think?"

Harry saw Draco's face up close now, right beside his father's. They were extraordinarily alike, except that while his father looked beside himself with excitement, Draco's expression was full of reluctance, even fear.

"I don't know," he said, and he walked away toward the fireplace where his mother stood watching.

"We had better be certain, Lucius," Narcissa called to her husband in her cold, clear voice. "Completely sure that it is Potter, before we summon the Dark Lord . . . They say this is his" — she was looking closely at the blackthorn wand — "but it does not resemble Ollivander's description. . . . If we are mistaken, if we call the Dark Lord here for nothing . . . Remember what he did to Rowle and Dolohov?"

"What about the Mudblood, then?" growled Greyback. Harry was nearly thrown off his feet as the Snatchers forced the prisoners to swivel around again, so that the light fell on Hermione instead.

"Wait," said Narcissa sharply. "Yes — yes, she was in Madam Malkin's with Potter! I saw her picture in the *Prophet*! Look, Draco, isn't it the Granger girl?"

"I . . . maybe . . . yeah."

"But then, that's the Weasley boy!" shouted Lucius, striding around the bound prisoners to face Ron. "It's them, Potter's friends — Draco, look at him, isn't it Arthur Weasley's son, what's his name — ?"

"Yeah," said Draco again, his back to the prisoners. "It could be."

The drawing room door opened behind Harry. A woman spoke, and the sound of the voice wound Harry's fear to an even higher pitch.

"What is this? What's happened, Cissy?"

Bellatrix Lestrange walked slowly around the prisoners, and stopped on Harry's right, staring at Hermione through her heavily lidded eyes.

"But surely," she said quietly, "this is the Mudblood girl? This is

Granger?"

"Yes, yes, it's Granger!" cried Lucius. "And beside her, we think, Potter! Potter and his friends, caught at last!"

"Potter?" shrieked Bellatrix, and she backed away, the better to take in Harry. "Are you sure? Well then, the Dark Lord must be informed at once!"

She dragged back her left sleeve: Harry saw the Dark Mark burned into the flesh of her arm, and knew that she was about to touch it, to summon her beloved master —

"I was about to call him!" said Lucius, and his hand actually closed upon Bellatrix's wrist, preventing her from touching the Mark. "*I* shall summon him, Bella, Potter has been brought to my house, and it is therefore upon my authority —"

"Your authority!" she sneered, attempting to wrench her hand from his grasp. "You lost your authority when you lost your wand, Lucius! How dare you! Take your hands off me!"

"This is nothing to do with you, you did not capture the boy —"

"Begging your pardon, *Mr.* Malfoy," interjected Greyback, "but it's us that caught Potter, and it's us that'll be claiming the gold —"

"Gold!" laughed Bellatrix, still attempting to throw off her brother-in-law, her free hand groping in her pocket for her wand. "Take your gold, filthy scavenger, what do I want with gold? I seek only the honor of his — of —"

She stopped struggling, her dark eyes fixed upon something Harry could not see. Jubilant at her capitulation, Lucius threw her hand from him and ripped up his own sleeve —

"STOP!" shrieked Bellatrix. "Do not touch it, we shall all perish if

the Dark Lord comes now!"

Lucius froze, his index finger hovering over his own Mark. Bellatrix strode out of Harry's limited line of vision.

"What is that?" he heard her say.

"Sword," grunted an out-of-sight Snatcher.

"Give it to me."

"It's not yorn, missus, it's mine, I reckon I found it."

There was a bang and a flash of red light: Harry knew that the Snatcher had been Stunned. There was a roar of anger from his fellows: Scabior drew his wand.

"What d'you think you're playing at, woman?"

"Stupefy!" she screamed. *"Stupefy!"*

They were no match for her, even though there were four of them against one of her: She was a witch, as Harry knew, with prodigious skill and no conscience. They fell where they stood, all except Greyback, who had been forced into a kneeling position, his arms outstretched. Out of the corners of his eyes Harry saw Bellatrix bearing down upon the werewolf, the sword of Gryffindor gripped tightly in her hand, her face waxen.

"Where did you get this sword?" she whispered to Greyback as she pulled his wand out of his unresisting grip.

"How dare you?" he snarled, his mouth the only thing that could move as he was forced to gaze up at her. He bared his pointed teeth. "Release me, woman!"

"Where did you find this sword?" she repeated, brandishing it in his face. "Snape sent it to my vault in Gringotts!"

"It was in their tent," rasped Greyback. "Release me, I say!"

She waved her wand, and the werewolf sprang to his feet, but appeared too wary to approach her. He prowled behind an armchair, his filthy curved nails clutching its back.

"Draco, move this scum outside," said Bellatrix, indicating the unconscious men. "If you haven't got the guts to finish them, then leave them in the courtyard for me."

"Don't you dare speak to Draco like —" said Narcissa furiously, but Bellatrix screamed,

"Be quiet! The situation is graver than you can possibly imagine, Cissy! We have a very serious problem!"

She stood, panting slightly, looking down at the sword, examining its hilt. Then she turned to look at the silent prisoners.

"If it is indeed Potter, he must not be harmed," she muttered, more to herself than to the others. "The Dark Lord wishes to dispose of Potter himself. . . . But if he finds out . . . I must . . . I must know. . . ."

She turned back to her sister again.

"The prisoners must be placed in the cellar, while I think what to do!"

"This is my house, Bella, you don't give orders in my —"

"Do it! You have no idea of the danger we are in!" shrieked Bellatrix. She looked frightening, mad; a thin stream of fire issued from her wand and burned a hole in the carpet.

Narcissa hesitated for a moment, then addressed the werewolf.

"Take these prisoners down to the cellar, Greyback."

"Wait," said Bellatrix sharply. "All except . . . except for the Mudblood."

Greyback gave a grunt of pleasure.

"No!" shouted Ron. "You can have me, keep me!"

Bellatrix hit him across the face; the blow echoed around the room.

"If she dies under questioning, I'll take you next," she said. "Blood traitor is next to Mudblood in my book. Take them downstairs, Greyback, and make sure they are secure, but do nothing more to them — yet."

She threw Greyback's wand back to him, then took a short silver knife from under her robes. She cut Hermione free from the other prisoners, then dragged her by the hair into the middle of the room, while Greyback forced the rest of them to shuffle across to another door, into a dark passageway, his wand held out in front of him, projecting an invisible and irresistible force.

"Reckon she'll let me have a bit of the girl when she's finished with her?" Greyback crooned as he forced them along the corridor. "I'd say I'll get a bite or two, wouldn't you, ginger?"

Harry could feel Ron shaking. They were forced down a steep flight of stairs, still tied back-to-back and in danger of slipping and breaking their necks at any moment. At the bottom was a heavy door. Greyback unlocked it with a tap of his wand, then forced them into a dank and musty room and left them in total darkness. The echoing bang of the slammed cellar door had not died away before there was a terrible, drawn-out scream from directly above them.

"HERMIONE!" Ron bellowed, and he started to writhe and struggle against the ropes tying them together, so that Harry staggered. "HERMIONE!"

"Be quiet!" Harry said. "Shut up, Ron, we need to work out a way —"

"HERMIONE! HERMIONE!"

"We need a plan, stop yelling — we need to get these ropes off —"

"Harry?" came a whisper through the darkness. "Ron? Is that you?"

Ron stopped shouting. There was a sound of movement close by them, then Harry saw a shadow moving closer.

"Harry? Ron?"

"Luna?"

"Yes, it's me! Oh no, I didn't want you to be caught!"

"Luna, can you help us get these ropes off?" said Harry.

"Oh yes, I expect so. . . . There's an old nail we use if we need to break anything. . . . Just a moment . . ."

Hermione screamed again from overhead, and they could hear Bellatrix screaming too, but her words were inaudible, for Ron shouted again, "HERMIONE! HERMIONE!"

"Mr. Ollivander?" Harry could hear Luna saying. "Mr. Ollivander, have you got the nail? If you just move over a little bit . . . I think it was beside the water jug. . . ."

She was back within seconds.

"You'll need to stay still," she said.

Harry could feel her digging at the rope's tough fibers to work the knots free. From upstairs they heard Bellatrix's voice.

"I'm going to ask you again! Where did you get this sword?

Where?"

"We found it — we found it — PLEASE!" Hermione screamed again; Ron struggled harder than ever, and the rusty nail slipped onto Harry's wrist.

"Ron, please stay still!" Luna whispered. "I can't see what I'm doing —"

"My pocket!" said Ron. "In my pocket, there's a Deluminator, and it's full of light!"

A few seconds later, there was a click, and the luminescent spheres the Deluminator had sucked from the lamps in the tent flew into the cellar: Unable to rejoin their sources, they simply hung there, like tiny suns, flooding the underground room with light. Harry saw Luna, all eyes in her white face, and the motionless figure of Ollivander the wandmaker, curled up on the floor in the corner. Craning around, he caught sight of their fellow prisoners: Dean and Griphook the goblin, who seemed barely conscious, kept standing by the ropes that bound him to the humans.

"Oh, that's much easier, thanks, Ron," said Luna, and she began hacking at their bindings again. "Hello, Dean!"

From above came Bellatrix's voice.

"You are lying, filthy Mudblood, and I know it! You have been inside my vault at Gringotts! Tell the truth, *tell the truth*!"

Another terrible scream —

"HERMIONE!"

"What else did you take? What else have you got? Tell me the truth or, I swear, I shall run you through with this knife!"

"There!"

Harry felt the ropes fall away and turned, rubbing his wrists, to see Ron running around the cellar, looking up at the low ceiling, searching for a trapdoor. Dean, his face bruised and bloody, said "Thanks" to Luna and stood there, shivering, but Griphook sank onto the cellar floor, looking groggy and disoriented, many welts across his swarthy face.

Ron was now trying to Disapparate without a wand.

"There's no way out, Ron," said Luna, watching his fruitless efforts. "The cellar is completely escape-proof. I tried, at first. Mr. Ollivander has been here for a long time, he's tried everything."

Hermione was screaming again: The sound went through Harry like physical pain. Barely conscious of the fierce prickling of his scar, he too started to run around the cellar, feeling the walls for he hardly knew what, knowing in his heart that it was useless.

"What else did you take, what else? ANSWER ME! *CRUCIO!*"

Hermione's screams echoed off the walls upstairs, Ron was half sobbing as he pounded the walls with his fists, and Harry in utter desperation seized Hagrid's pouch from around his neck and groped inside it: He pulled out Dumbledore's Snitch and shook it, hoping for he did not know what — nothing happened — he waved the broken halves of the phoenix wand, but they were lifeless — the mirror fragment fell sparkling to the floor, and he saw a gleam of brightest blue —

Dumbledore's eye was gazing at him out of the mirror.

"Help us!" he yelled at it in mad desperation. "We're in the cellar of Malfoy Manor, help us!"

The eye blinked and was gone.

Harry was not even sure that it had really been there. He tilted the shard of mirror this way and that, and saw nothing reflected there but the walls and ceiling of their prison, and upstairs Hermione was screaming worse than ever, and next to him Ron was bellowing, "HERMIONE! HERMIONE!"

"How did you get into my vault?" they heard Bellatrix scream. "Did that dirty little goblin in the cellar help you?"

"We only met him tonight!" Hermione sobbed. "We've never been inside your vault. . . . It isn't the real sword! It's a copy, just a copy!"

"A copy?" screeched Bellatrix. "Oh, a likely story!"

"But we can find out easily!" came Lucius's voice. "Draco, fetch the goblin, he can tell us whether the sword is real or not!"

Harry dashed across the cellar to where Griphook was huddled on the floor.

"Griphook," he whispered into the goblin's pointed ear, "you must tell them that sword's a fake, they mustn't know it's the real one, Griphook, please —"

He could hear someone scuttling down the cellar steps; next moment, Draco's shaking voice spoke from behind the door.

"Stand back. Line up against the back wall. Don't try anything, or I'll kill you!"

They did as they were bidden; as the lock turned, Ron clicked the Deluminator and the lights whisked back into his pocket, restoring the cellar's darkness. The door flew open; Malfoy marched inside, wand held out in front of him, pale and determined. He seized the little goblin by the arm and backed out again, dragging Griphook with him. The door slammed shut and at the same moment a loud *crack* echoed

inside the cellar.

Ron clicked the Deluminator. Three balls of light flew back into the air from his pocket, revealing Dobby the house-elf, who had just Apparated into their midst.

"DOB — !"

Harry hit Ron on the arm to stop him shouting, and Ron looked terrified at his mistake. Footsteps crossed the ceiling overhead: Draco marching Griphook to Bellatrix.

Dobby's enormous, tennis-ball-shaped eyes were wide; he was trembling from his feet to the tips of his ears. He was back in the home of his old masters, and it was clear that he was petrified.

"Harry Potter," he squeaked in the tiniest quiver of a voice, "Dobby has come to rescue you."

"But how did you — ?"

An awful scream drowned Harry's words: Hermione was being tortured again. He cut to the essentials.

"You can Disapparate out of this cellar?" he asked Dobby, who nodded, his ears flapping.

"And you can take humans with you?"

Dobby nodded again.

"Right. Dobby, I want you to grab Luna, Dean, and Mr. Ollivander, and take them — take them to —"

"Bill and Fleur's," said Ron. "Shell Cottage on the outskirts of Tinworth!"

The elf nodded for a third time.

"And then come back," said Harry. "Can you do that, Dobby?"

“Of course, Harry Potter,” whispered the little elf. He hurried over to Mr. Ollivander, who appeared to be barely conscious. He took one of the wandmaker’s hands in his own, then held out the other to Luna and Dean, neither of whom moved.

“Harry, we want to help you!” Luna whispered.

“We can’t leave you here,” said Dean.

“Go, both of you! We’ll see you at Bill and Fleur’s.”

As Harry spoke, his scar burned worse than ever, and for a few seconds he looked down, not upon the wandmaker, but on another man who was just as old, just as thin, but laughing scornfully.

“Kill me, then, Voldemort, I welcome death! But my death will not bring you what you seek. . . . There is so much you do not understand. . . .”

He felt Voldemort’s fury, but as Hermione screamed again he shut it out, returning to the cellar and the horror of his own present.

“Go!” Harry beseeched Luna and Dean. “Go! We’ll follow, just go!”

They caught hold of the elf’s outstretched fingers. There was another loud *crack,* and Dobby, Luna, Dean, and Ollivander vanished.

“What was that?” shouted Lucius Malfoy from over their heads. “Did you hear that? What was that noise in the cellar?”

Harry and Ron stared at each other.

“Draco — no, call Wormtail! Make him go and check!”

Footsteps crossed the room overhead, then there was silence. Harry knew that the people in the drawing room were listening for more noises from the cellar.

"We're going to have to try and tackle him," he whispered to Ron. They had no choice: The moment anyone entered the room and saw the absence of three prisoners, they were lost. "Leave the lights on," Harry added, and as they heard someone descending the steps outside the door, they backed against the wall on either side of it.

"Stand back," came Wormtail's voice. "Stand away from the door. I am coming in."

The door flew open. For a split second Wormtail gazed into the apparently empty cellar, ablaze with light from the three miniature suns floating in midair. Then Harry and Ron launched themselves upon him. Ron seized Wormtail's wand arm and forced it upward; Harry slapped a hand to his mouth, muffling his voice. Silently they struggled: Wormtail's wand emitted sparks; his silver hand closed around Harry's throat.

"What is it, Wormtail?" called Lucius Malfoy from above.

"Nothing!" Ron called back, in a passable imitation of Wormtail's wheezy voice. "All fine!"

Harry could barely breathe.

"You're going to kill me?" Harry choked, attempting to prise off the metal fingers. "After I saved your life? You owe me, Wormtail!"

The silver fingers slackened. Harry had not expected it: He wrenched himself free, astonished, keeping his hand over Wormtail's mouth. He saw the ratlike man's small watery eyes widen with fear and surprise: He seemed just as shocked as Harry at what his hand had done, at the tiny, merciful impulse it had betrayed, and he continued to struggle more powerfully, as though to undo that moment of weakness.

"And we'll have that," whispered Ron, tugging Wormtail's wand from his other hand.

Wandless, helpless, Pettigrew's pupils dilated in terror. His eyes had slid from Harry's face to something else. His own silver fingers were moving inexorably toward his own throat.

"No —"

Without pausing to think, Harry tried to drag back the hand, but there was no stopping it. The silver tool that Voldemort had given his most cowardly servant had turned upon its disarmed and useless owner; Pettigrew was reaping his reward for his hesitation, his moment of pity; he was being strangled before their eyes.

"No!"

Ron had released Wormtail too, and together he and Harry tried to pull the crushing metal fingers from around Wormtail's throat, but it was no use. Pettigrew was turning blue.

"Relashio!" said Ron, pointing the wand at the silver hand, but nothing happened; Pettigrew dropped to his knees, and at the same moment, Hermione gave a dreadful scream from overhead. Wormtail's eyes rolled upward in his purple face; he gave a last twitch, and was still.

Harry and Ron looked at each other, then leaving Wormtail's body on the floor behind them, ran up the stairs and back into the shadowy passageway leading to the drawing room. Cautiously they crept along it until they reached the drawing room door, which was ajar. Now they had a clear view of Bellatrix looking down at Griphook, who was holding Gryffindor's sword in his long-fingered hands. Hermione was lying at Bellatrix's feet. She was barely stirring.

"Well?" Bellatrix said to Griphook. "Is it the true sword?"

Harry waited, holding his breath, fighting against the prickling of his scar.

"No," said Griphook. "It is a fake."

"Are you sure?" panted Bellatrix. "Quite sure?"

"Yes," said the goblin.

Relief broke across her face, all tension drained from it.

"Good," she said, and with a casual flick of her wand she slashed another deep cut into the goblin's face, and he dropped with a yell at her feet. She kicked him aside. "And now," she said in a voice that burst with triumph, "we call the Dark Lord!"

And she pushed back her sleeve and touched her forefinger to the Dark Mark.

At once, Harry's scar felt as though it had split open again. His true surroundings vanished: He was Voldemort, and the skeletal wizard before him was laughing toothlessly at him; he was enraged at the summons he felt — he had warned them, he had told them to summon him for nothing less than Potter. If they were mistaken . . .

"Kill me, then!" demanded the old man. "You will not win, you cannot win! That wand will never, ever be yours —"

And Voldemort's fury broke: A burst of green light filled the prison room and the frail old body was lifted from its hard bed and then fell back, lifeless, and Voldemort returned to the window, his wrath barely controllable . . . They would suffer his retribution if they had no good reason for calling him back. . . .

"And I think," said Bellatrix's voice, "we can dispose of the Mudblood. Greyback, take her if you want her."

"NOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Ron had burst into the drawing room; Bellatrix looked around, shocked; she turned her wand to face Ron instead —

"Expelliarmus!" he roared, pointing Wormtail's wand at Bellatrix, and hers flew into the air and was caught by Harry, who had sprinted after Ron. Lucius, Narcissa, Draco, and Greyback wheeled about; Harry yelled, *"Stupefy!"* and Lucius Malfoy collapsed onto the hearth. Jets of light flew from Draco's, Narcissa's, and Greyback's wands; Harry threw himself to the floor, rolling behind a sofa to avoid them.

"STOP OR SHE DIES!"

Panting, Harry peered around the edge of the sofa. Bellatrix was supporting Hermione, who seemed to be unconscious, and was holding her short silver knife to Hermione's throat.

"Drop your wands," she whispered. "Drop them, or we'll see exactly how filthy her blood is!"

Ron stood rigid, clutching Wormtail's wand. Harry straightened up, still holding Bellatrix's.

"I said, drop them!" she screeched, pressing the blade into Hermione's throat: Harry saw beads of blood appear there.

"All right!" he shouted, and he dropped Bellatrix's wand onto the floor at his feet. Ron did the same with Wormtail's. Both raised their hands to shoulder height.

"Good!" she leered. "Draco, pick them up! The Dark Lord is coming, Harry Potter! Your death approaches!"

Harry knew it; his scar was bursting with the pain of it, and he could feel Voldemort flying through the sky from far away, over a

dark and stormy sea, and soon he would be close enough to Apparate to them, and Harry could see no way out.

"Now," said Bellatrix softly, as Draco hurried back to her with the wands, "Cissy, I think we ought to tie these little heroes up again, while Greyback takes care of Miss Mudblood. I am sure the Dark Lord will not begrudge you the girl, Greyback, after what you have done tonight."

At the last word there was a peculiar grinding noise from above. All of them looked upward in time to see the crystal chandelier tremble; then, with a creak and an ominous jingling, it began to fall. Bellatrix was directly beneath it; dropping Hermione, she threw herself aside with a scream. The chandelier crashed to the floor in an explosion of crystal and chains, falling on top of Hermione and the goblin, who still clutched the sword of Gryffindor. Glittering shards of crystal flew in all directions: Draco doubled over, his hands covering his bloody face.

As Ron ran to pull Hermione out of the wreckage, Harry took his chance: He leapt over an armchair and wrested the three wands from Draco's grip, pointed all of them at Greyback, and yelled, *"Stupefy!"* The werewolf was lifted off his feet by the triple spell, flew up to the ceiling, and then smashed to the ground.

As Narcissa dragged Draco out of the way of further harm, Bellatrix sprang to her feet, her hair flying as she brandished the silver knife; but Narcissa had directed her wand at the doorway.

"Dobby!" she screamed, and even Bellatrix froze. "You! *You* dropped the chandelier — ?"

The tiny elf trotted into the room, his shaking finger pointing at his

old mistress.

"You must not hurt Harry Potter," he squeaked.

"Kill him, Cissy!" shrieked Bellatrix, but there was another loud *crack,* and Narcissa's wand too flew into the air and landed on the other side of the room.

"You dirty little monkey!" bawled Bellatrix. "How dare you take a witch's wand, how dare you defy your masters?"

"Dobby has no master!" squealed the elf. "Dobby is a free elf, and Dobby has come to save Harry Potter and his friends!"

Harry's scar was blinding him with pain. Dimly he knew that they had moments, seconds before Voldemort was with them.

"Ron, catch — and GO!" he yelled, throwing one of the wands to him; then he bent down to tug Griphook out from under the chandelier. Hoisting the groaning goblin, who still clung to the sword, over one shoulder, Harry seized Dobby's hand and spun on the spot to Disapparate.

As he turned into darkness he caught one last view of the drawing room: of the pale, frozen figures of Narcissa and Draco, of the streak of red that was Ron's hair, and a blur of flying silver, as Bellatrix's knife flew across the room at the place where he was vanishing —

Bill and Fleur's . . . Shell Cottage . . . Bill and Fleur's . . .

He had disappeared into the unknown; all he could do was repeat the name of the destination and hope that it would suffice to take him there. The pain in his forehead pierced him, and the weight of the goblin bore down upon him; he could feel the blade of Gryffindor's sword bumping against his back; Dobby's hand jerked in his; he wondered whether the elf was trying to take charge, to pull them in

the right direction, and tried, by squeezing the fingers, to indicate that that was fine with him. . . .

And then they hit solid earth and smelled salty air. Harry fell to his knees, relinquished Dobby's hand, and attempted to lower Griphook gently to the ground.

"Are you all right?" he said as the goblin stirred, but Griphook merely whimpered.

Harry squinted around through the darkness. There seemed to be a cottage a short way away under the wide starry sky, and he thought he saw movement outside it.

"Dobby, is this Shell Cottage?" he whispered, clutching the two wands he had brought from the Malfoys', ready to fight if he needed to. "Have we come to the right place? Dobby?"

He looked around. The little elf stood feet from him.

"DOBBY!"

The elf swayed slightly, stars reflected in his wide, shining eyes. Together, he and Harry looked down at the silver hilt of the knife protruding from the elf's heaving chest.

"Dobby — no — HELP!" Harry bellowed toward the cottage, toward the people moving there. "HELP!"

He did not know or care whether they were wizards or Muggles, friends or foes; all he cared about was that a dark stain was spreading across Dobby's front, and that he had stretched out his thin arms to Harry with a look of supplication. Harry caught him and laid him sideways on the cool grass.

"Dobby, no, don't die, don't die —"

The elf's eyes found him, and his lips trembled with the effort to

form words.

“Harry . . . Potter . . .”

And then with a little shudder the elf became quite still, and his eyes were nothing more than great glassy orbs, sprinkled with light from the stars they could not see.

— HOOFSTUK DRIE-EN-TWINTIG —

Die Malfoys se Herehuis

Harry kyk om na die ander twee wat nou net silhoeëtte in die donker is. Hy sien hoe Hermione met haar towerstaf mik, nie buitentoe nie, maar na sy gesig; daar is 'n harde slag, 'n ontploffing van wit lig, en hy trek krom van pyn, nie in staat om te sien nie. Hy voel sy gesig vinnig onder sy hande swel terwyl swaar voetstappe hom omring.

"Staan op, gespuis."

Onbekende hande sleep Harry ru oor die grond. Voor hy kan keer, deursoek iemand sy sakke en haal die swartdoringtowerstaf uit. Harry gryp sy ondraaglik seer gesig vas; dit voel onherkenbaar onder sy vingers, styf, geswel en opgehewe asof hy aan die een of ander geweldige allergiese reaksie ly. Sy oë het vernou tot skrefies waardeur hy skaars kan sien; sy bril val af terwyl hy by die tent uitgepluk word; al wat hy kan uitmaak, is die onduidelike figure van vier of vyf mense wat Ron en Hermione ook buitentoe boender.

"Los – haar – uit!" skree Ron. Daar is die onmiskenbare geluid van kneukels wat vleis tref. Ron kreun van pyn en Hermione skree: "Nee! Los hom, los hom uit!"

"Daar gaan erger dinge as dit aan jou kêrel gedoen word as hy op my lys is," sê die aaklig bekende kraakstem. "Sappige meisie . . . wat 'n vooruitsig . . . Ek is versot op so 'n sagte vel . . ."

Harry se maag trek saam. Hy weet wie dit is: Fenrir Greyback, die weerwolf wat toegelaat is om 'n Doodseterkleed te dra in ruil vir sy gehuurde barbaarsheid.

"Deursoek die tent!" sê 'n ander stem.

Harry word met sy gesig na onder op die grond neergegooi. 'n Dowwe slag sê vir hom Ron is langs hom neergesmyt. Hulle hoor voetstappe en 'n geraas; die mans stamp stoele om soos hulle die tent se binnekant deursoek.

"Kom ons kyk wat het ons hier," sê Greyback se leedvermakerige stem van bo af en Harry word op sy rug omgerol. 'n Straal van 'n towerstaflig val op sy gesig en Greyback lag.

"Ek sal Botterbier nodig hê om dié een mee af te sluk. Wat het met jou gebeur, Lelik?"

Harry antwoord nie dadelik nie.

"Ek sê," herhaal Greyback en Harry kry 'n hou in die diafragma wat hom laat dubbel vou van pyn, "wat het met jou gebeur?"

"Gesteek," mompel Harry. "Bye."

"Ja-nee, dit lyk so," sê 'n tweede stem.

"Wat's jou van?" grom Greyback.

"Dudley," sê Harry.

"En jou naam?"

"Ek – Vernon. Vernon Dudley."

"Kyk op die lys, Scabior," sê Greyback, en Harry hoor hom skuins draai om af na Ron toe te kyk. "En wat van jou, Rooies?"

"Stan Shunpike," sê Ron.

"Se maai," sê die man genaamd Scabior. "Ons ken Stan Shunpike. Hy't al vir ons 'n paar joppies gegee."

Daar is nog 'n dowwe slag.

"Ek's Bardy," sê Ron en Harry kan hoor sy mond is vol bloed. "Bardy Weadley."

"'n Weasley?" kras Greyback. "So jy's familie van bloedverraaiers, selfs al is jy nie 'n Modderbloed nie. En laastens, ons fraai klein maatjie . . ." Die genot in sy stem gee Harry hoendervleis.

"Stadig, Greyback," sê Scabior bo-oor die ander se gekoggel.

"Toemaar, ek gaan haar nie nou al byt nie. Ons sal sien of sy haar naam 'n bietjie vinniger onthou as Barny. Wie's jy, meisietjie?"

"Penelope Clearwater," sê Hermione. Sy klink vreesbevange maar oortuigend.

"Wat's jou Bloedstatus?"

"Halfbloed," sê Hermione.

"Maklik genoeg om seker te maak," sê Scabior. "Maar al drie lyk of hulle nog Hogwarts-ouderdom kan wees –"

"Ons is beg daar," sê Ron.

"O, julle's weg daar, Rooies?" sê Scabior. "En julle't besluit om te gaan kampeer? En julle't gedink julle gaan sommer vir die grap die Donker Heer se naam gebruik?"

"Nie birrie grabbie," sê Ron. "Ber oggeluk."

"Per ongeluk, nè?" Daar is weer 'n koggelende gelag.

"Weet julle wie hou daarvan om die Donker Heer se naam te gebruik, Weasley?" grom Greyback. "Die Orde van die Feniks. Beteken dit iets vir jou?"

"Nee."

"Wel, hulle betoon nie die gepaste respek aan die Donker Heer

nie, so die naam is ge-Taboe. 'n Paar lede van die Orde is op dié manier opgespoor. Ons sal sien. Bind hulle saam met die ander twee gevangenes vas!"

Iemand pluk Harry aan die hare op, sleep hom 'n entjie, druk hom in 'n sittende posisie af en begin hom dan rug-teen-rug aan ander mense vasbind. Harry is nog steeds halfblind en kan skaars enigiets deur sy opgeswelde oë sien. Toe die man wat hulle vasgebind het uiteindelik wegloop, fluister Harry vir die ander twee.

"Het enigiemand nog 'n towerstaf?"

"Nee," sê Ron en Hermione aan weerskante van hom.

"Dis alles my skuld. Ek het die naam gesê, ek's jammer –"

"Harry?"

Dit is 'n nuwe maar bekende stem, en dit kom van reg agter Harry af, van die persoon wat aan Hermione se linkerkant vasgebind is.

"Dean?"

"Dit is jy! As hulle uitvind wie hulle het! Hulle's Grypers, hulle soek net stokkiesdraaiers om vir goud te verkoop –"

"Nie 'n slegte vangs vir een aand nie," sê Greyback terwyl 'n paar spykersoolstewels naby Harry verbymarsjeer en hulle hoor hoe nog goed in die tent omgegooi word. "'n Modderbloed, 'n voortvlugtige kabouter en drie stokkiesdraaiers. Het jy hulle name al op die lys nagegaan, Scabior?" brul hy.

"Ja. Hier's nie 'n Vernon Dudley op nie, Greyback."

"Interessant," sê Greyback. "Dis interessant."

Hy hurk langs Harry, wat deur die piepklein openinkie tussen sy geswolle ooglede 'n gesig sien wat oortrek is met gekoekte grys hare en snorbaarde, en gepunte bruin tande en sere aan die mondhoeke. Greyback ruik soos daarbo op die Toring waar Dumbledore dood is: na vullis, sweet en bloed.

"So jy word nie gesoek nie, Vernon? Of is jy onder 'n ander naam op daai lys? In watter huis was jy by Hogwarts?"

"Slytherin," sê Harry outomaties.

"Snaaks hoe hulle almal dink dis wat ons wil hoor," sê Scabior laggend uit die skaduwees. "Maar nie een van hulle kan vir ons sê waar die geselskamer is nie."

"Dis in die kelders," sê Harry duidelik. "Jy gaan deur die muur soontoe in. Dis vol skedels en goed en dis onder die meer, so die lig is heeltemal groen."

Daar is 'n kort pouse.

"Wel, wel, dit lyk of ons regtig 'n klein Slytherin gevang het," sê Scabior. "Die geluk is aan jou kant, Vernon, want daar's nie baie Modderbloed Slytherins nie. Wie's jou pa?"

"Hy werk by die Ministerie," lieg Harry. Hy weet sy hele storie sal by die geringste ondersoek in duie stort, maar aan die ander kant het hy in elk geval net tyd tot sy gesig weer normaal lyk voor sy doppie klink. "Departement van Magiese Ongelukke en Katastrofes."

"Weet jy wat, Greyback?" sê Scabior. "Ek dink daar *is* 'n Dudley daar."

Harry kan skaars asemhaal: kan geluk, suiwer geluk, hulle veilig hier uitkry?

"Wel, wel," sê Greyback, en Harry hoor 'n tikkie vrees in daardie wrede stem en weet Greyback wonder of hy inderdaad nou net 'n Ministerie-amptenaar se seun gevang en vasgebind het. Harry se hart klop wild teen die toue om sy ribbes; hy sal nie verbaas wees as Greyback dit kan sien nie. "As jy die waarheid praat, Lelik, sal jy nie bang wees om 'n draai by die Ministerie te gaan gooi nie. Ek is seker jou pa sal ons beloon omdat ons jou opgetel het."

"Maar," sê Harry met 'n kurkdroë mond, "as julle ons net –"

"Hei!" roep iemand van binne die tent af. "Kyk hier, Greyback!"

'n Donker figuur kom haastig na hulle toe aangestap en Harry sien 'n silwer glinstering in hulle towerstawwe se lig. Hulle het op Gryffindor se swaard afgekom.

"Uitste-e-kend," sê Greyback tevrede en vat dit by sy makker. "O, absoluut uitstekend. Lyk of dit deur kabouters gemaak is. Waar kom jy aan so iets?"

"Dis my pa s'n," lieg Harry en koester 'n wanhopige hoop dat dit te donker vir Greyback is om die naam wat net onder die hef gegraveer is, te sien. "Ons het dit geleen om brandhout mee te kap –"

"Wag bietjie, Greyback! Kyk hier, in die *Profeet*!"

Toe Scabior dit sê, begin Harry se litteken, wat styf oor sy geswelde voorkop gestrek is, woes brand. Duideliker as wat hy enigiets om hom kan uitmaak, sien hy 'n gebou met torings, 'n sinistere fort, gitswart en onheilspellend: Voldemort se gedagtes is skielik weer vlymskerp; hy sweef na die reusagtige gebou toe met 'n gevoel van kalm, euforiese doelgerigtheid . . .

So naby . . . so naby . . .

Met geweldige wilskrag sluit Harry sy verstand af van Voldemort se gedagtes en pluk homself terug na waar hy sit, vasgebind aan Ron, Hermione, Dean en Griphook in die donker, en luister na Greyback en Scabior.

"'*Hermione Granger*,'" lees Scabior, "'*die Modderbloed wat almal weet saam met Harry Potter reis.*'"

Harry se litteken brand in die stilte, maar hy wend 'n uiterse

poging aan om homself teenwoordig te hou, om nie in Voldemort se gedagtes weg te glip nie. Hy hoor hoe kraak Greyback se stewels toe hy voor Hermione afbuk.

"Weet jy wat, meisietjie? Dié foto lyk heluit baie na jou."

"Nee! Dit is nie ek nie!"

Hermione se beangste gilletjie is so goed soos 'n skulderkenning.

"'. . . *wat almal weet saam met Harry Potter reis*'," herhaal Greyback sag.

Daar daal 'n stilte oor die toneel neer. Harry se litteken pyn intens, maar hy veg met al sy mag teen die aantrekkingskrag van Voldemort se gedagtes: dit was nog nooit so belangrik om in sy eie kop te bly nie.

"Wel, dit verander dinge, of hoe?" fluister Greyback.

Niemand praat nie: Harry kan voel hoe die bende Grypers hulle roerloos dophou en hoe Hermione se arm teen syne bewe. Greyback staan op, gee 'n paar tree tot waar Harry sit, en buk dan weer af om sy misvormde gelaatstrekke van naby te bekyk.

"Wat's daai op jou voorkop, Vernon?" vra hy sag en sy asem stink in Harry se neusgate terwyl hy met 'n vieslike vuil vinger aan die styf gespande litteken druk.

"Moenie daaraan vat nie!" gil Harry. Hy kan homself nie keer nie; dit voel of hy gaan opgooi van die pyn.

"Ek dog jy dra 'n bril, Potter?" fluister Greyback.

"Ek het 'n bril gekry!" kef een van die Grypers wat op die agtergrond rondhang. "Daar was 'n bril in die tent, Greyback, wag –"

En sekondes later word Harry se bril terug op sy gesig geplak. Die Grypers kom nou al nader en staar hom aan.

"Dit is hy!" krys Greyback. "Ons het vir Potter gevang!"

Hulle gee 'n hele paar tree terug, verstom oor wat hulle reggekry het. Harry veg nog om teenwoordig te bly in sy eie barstende kop en kan aan niks dink om te sê nie: gebroke beelde breek deur die oppervlak van sy brein –

. . . hy sweef om die swart fort se hoë mure –

Nee, hy is Harry, vasgebind en sonder 'n towerstaf, in ernstige gevaar –

. . . kyk op, op na die heel boonste venster, die hoogste toring –

Hy is Harry, en hulle bespreek sy lot in gedempte stemme –

. . . tyd om te vlieg –

". . . na die Ministerie toe?"

"Te hel met die Ministerie," grom Greyback. "Hulle sal die krediet daarvoor vat en dan kry ons niks. Ek sê ons vat hom reguit na Jy-Weet-Wie toe."

"Sal jy hom ontbied? *Hiernatoe?*" vra Scabior en klink verstom, vreesbevange.

"Nee," grom Greyback. "Ek het nie – hulle sê hy gebruik die Malfoys se huis as 'n basis. Ons sal die seun soontoe vat."

Harry dink hy weet hoekom Greyback Voldemort nie ontbied nie. Die weerwolf mag dalk toegelaat word om 'n Doodseterkleed te dra wanneer hulle hom wil gebruik, maar net Voldemort se binnekring is met die Donker Merk gebrandmerk: hierdie hoogste eer is Greyback ontsê.

Harry se litteken skroei weer –

. . . en hy styg in die nag op, vlieg reguit na die venster heel bo aan die toring –

". . . heeltemal seker dis hy? Want as dit nie is nie, Greyback, is ons dood."

"Wie's die baas hier?" brul Greyback om hulle van sy oomblik van ontoereikendheid te laat vergeet. "Ek sê dis Potter, en hy plus sy towerstaf beteken op die daad tweehonderdduisend Galjoene! Maar as julle te lamsakkig is om saam te kom, enigeen van julle, dan gaan dit alles myne wees, en met 'n bietjie geluk gee hulle die meisie dalk op die koop toe vir my!"

. . . die venster is slegs 'n skrefie in die swart rots, nie groot genoeg vir 'n man om by in te kom nie . . . 'n skeletagtige figuur is net-net sigbaar daardeur, opgekrul onder 'n kombers . . . dood, of aan die slaap . . .?

"Oukei!" sê Scabior. "Oukei, ons is in! En wat van die res van hulle, Greyback? Wat sal ons met hulle doen?"

"Kan maar net sowel die hele spul saamvat. Ons het twee Modderbloede, dis nog tien Galjoene. Gee vir my die swaard ook. As dit robyne is, is dit nog 'n klein fortuin vir ons."

Die gevangenes word opgetrek. Harry hoor Hermione asemhaal, vinnig en vreesbevange.

"Hou hulle vas, styf vas. Ek sal Potter vat!" sê Greyback en gryp 'n hand vol van Harry se hare. Harry voel hoe krap die weerwolf se lang geel naels sy kopvel. "Ek tel tot by drie! Een – twee – drie –"

Hulle Disappareer en trek die gevangenes saam met hulle. Harry worstel en probeer om uit Greyback se greep los te kom, maar dit is tevergeefs. Ron en Hermione is styf aan weerskante van hom vasgedruk, hy kan nie uit die groep wegkom nie, en soos die asem uit hom gepers word, skroei sy litteken selfs nog seerder –

. . . terwyl hy hom soos 'n slang deur die skrefie van 'n venster wurm en so lig soos wasem in die selagtige vertrek land –

Die gevangenes steier teen mekaar toe hulle in 'n plaaslaning beland. Harry se oë is nog opgeswel en neem 'n oomblik om aan te

pas, dan sien hy twee smeedysterhekke aan die voet van wat soos 'n lang oprit lyk. Hy voel die kleinste krieseltjie verligting. Die ergste het nog nie gebeur nie: Voldemort is nie hier nie. Harry weet hy is in die een of ander vreemde, fortagtige plek, heel bo in 'n toring, want hy bied nog steeds weerstand teen daardie beeld. Hoe lank dit Voldemort gaan neem om hierheen te kom as hy eers weet Harry is hier, is 'n ander vraag . . .

Een van die Grypers stap met lang treë tot by die hekke en skud hulle.

"Hoe kom ons in? Die goed is gesluit, Greyback, ek kan nie – demmit!"

Hy ruk sy hande verskrik weg. Die yster verwring en vervorm tot daar 'n skrikwekkende gesig uit die abstrakte krulle en kronkels te voorskyn kom. Die gesig praat met 'n kletterende, weergalmende stem: "Vermeld jou doelwit."

"Ons het Potter!" brul Greyback triomfantlik. "Ons het Harry Potter gevang!"

Die hekke swaai oop.

"Komaan!" sê Greyback vir sy manne en die gevangenes word deur die hekke gestamp en met die oprit op, tussen hoë heinings wat hulle voetstappe demp. Harry sien 'n spookagtige wit ding bokant hom en besef dit moet 'n albinopou wees. Hy struikel en Greyback pluk hom regop. Nou strompel hy sywaarts vorentoe, rug-teen-rug aan die ander vier gevangenes vasgebind. Hy sluit sy opgehewe oë en laat 'n oomblik lank toe dat die pyn in sy litteken hom oorweldig, want hy wil weet wat Voldemort doen, of hy al weet Harry is gevang –

. . . die uitgeteerde figuur roer onder die dun kombers en rol om na hom toe; oë gaan oop in die skedel van 'n gesig . . . die tenger man sit regop, sy groot, hol oë vasgenael op hom, op Voldemort, en dan glimlag hy. Die meeste van sy tande is weg . . .

"So jy het gekom. Ek het gedink jy sal kom . . . eendag. Maar jou reis was tevergeefs. Ek het dit nooit gehad nie."

"Jy lieg!"

Terwyl Voldemort se woede binne-in hom klop, dreig Harry se litteken om te ontplof van pyn. Hy dwing sy gedagtes terug in sy eie liggaam en veg om teenwoordig te bly terwyl die gevangenes oor gruis aangejaag word.

Lig spoel oor hulle.

"Wat is dit?" vra 'n vrou se koue stem.

"Ons is hier om Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie te sien!" kras Greyback.

"Wie is julle?"

"Jy ken my!" Daar is wrewel in die weerwolf se stem. "Fenrir Greyback! Ons het Harry Potter gevang!"

Greyback gryp Harry, sleep hom sodat hy na die lig toe kyk en dwing so die ander gevangenes om ook om te skuifel.

"Ek weet hy's opgeswel, mevrou, maar dis hy!" begin Scabior praat. "As jy van naby kyk, sal jy sy litteken sien. En hierdie een, sien jy dié meisie? Dis die Modderbloed wat nog heeltyd saam met hom reis, mevrou. Dis definitief hy, en ons het sy towerstaf ook! Hier, mevrou –"

Harry sien hoe Narcissa Malfoy sy opgehewe gesig betrag. Scabior hou die swartdoringtowerstaf na haar toe uit. Sy lig haar wenkbroue.

"Bring hulle in," sê sy.

Harry en die ander word by die breë kliptrap opgeboender en geskop tot in 'n voorportaal met rye en rye portrette teen die mure.

"Volg my," sê Narcissa en stap vooruit deur die portaal. "My seun, Draco, is tuis vir die Paasvakansie. Hy sal weet of dit Harry Potter is."

Die sitkamer is verblindend ná die duister buitekant; selfs met sy oë amper toe kan Harry sien dat dit 'n baie groot vertrek is. 'n Kristalkroonkandelaar hang van die plafon af en daar is nog meer portrette teen die donkerpers mure. Twee figure staan op uit leunstoele voor 'n swierige marmerkaggel toe die Grypers die gevangenes by die vertrek indwing.

"Wat gaan aan?"

Lucius Malfoy se aaklig bekende draalstem weerklink in Harry se ore. Hy is nou paniekerig: hy sien geen ontsnapkans nie, en soos sy vrees meer word, is dit makliker om hom af te sluit van Voldemort se gedagtes, al brand sy litteken nog steeds.

"Hulle beweer hulle het Potter," sê Narcissa se koue stem. "Draco, kom hier."

Harry waag dit nie om reguit na Draco te kyk nie, maar sien hom sydelings: 'n figuur wat effens langer as hy is, kom orent uit 'n leunstoel, sy gesig 'n bleek, gepunte waas onder witblonde hare.

Greyback dwing die gevangenes om weer te draai sodat Harry reg onder die kroonkandelaar te staan kom.

"Wel, seun?" krys die weerwolf.

Harry kyk vas in 'n spieël bokant die kaggel, 'n groot, vergulde ding met 'n raam wat met ingewikkelde krulletjies versier is. Deur sy skrefiesoë sien hy sy eie weerkaatsing vir die eerste keer vandat hy uit Grimmauldplein weg is.

Sy gesig is enorm, blink en pienk, elke gelaatstrek verwring deur Hermione se paljas. Sy swart hare hang tot op sy skouers en daar is 'n donker skaduwee om sy kaak. As hy nie geweet het dit is hy wat hier staan nie, sou hy gewonder het wie dra sy bril. Hy besluit om nie te praat nie, want sy stem sal hom sekerlik verklap; nogtans vermy hy oogkontak met Draco terwyl laasgenoemde al hoe nader kom.

"Wel, Draco?" sê Lucius Malfoy. Hy klink geesdriftig. "Is dit? Is dit Harry Potter?"

"Ek is nie – ek is nie seker nie," sê Draco. Hy bly op 'n afstand van Greyback af en lyk net so bang om na Harry te kyk as wat Harry is om na hom te kyk.

"Maar kyk mooi na hom, kyk! Kom nader!"

Harry het Lucius Malfoy nog nooit so opgewonde gehoor nie.

"Draco, as ons Potter aan die Donker Heer uitlewer, sal hy ons alles vergew–"

"Wag bietjie, ek hoop nie ons gaan vergeet wie hom in werklikheid gevang het nie, meneer Malfoy?" sê Greyback dreigend.

"Natuurlik nie, natuurlik nie!" sê Lucius ongeduldig. Hy beweeg nou self tot by Harry, tot so naby dat Harry die bleek gesig wat gewoonlik so lui lyk selfs deur sy geswolle oë in skerp detail kan sien. Met sy gesig soos 'n opgehewe masker voel Harry asof hy tussen 'n hok se tralies deur loer.

"Wat het julle aan hom gedoen?" vra Lucius vir Greyback. "Hoe het hy in hierdie toestand beland?

"Dit was nie ons nie."

"Lyk vir my meer soos 'n Steekpaljas," sê Lucius.

Sy grys oë betrag Harry se voorkop.

"Daar's iets daar," fluister hy. "Dit kan 'n litteken wees wat styf gespan is . . . Draco, kom hier, kyk ordentlik! Wat dink jy?"

Harry sien Draco se gesig nou van naby, reg langsaan sy pa s'n. Hulle lyk buitengewoon eenders, behalwe dat die pa buite homself van opgewondenheid lyk terwyl Draco se uitdrukking vol huiwering, selfs vrees, is.

"Ek weet nie," sê hy en loop weg na die kaggel van waar sy ma alles staan en dophou.

"Ons sal moet seker maak, Lucius," sê Narcissa vir haar man in haar koue, helder stem. "Ons moet doodseker maak dis Potter voor ons die Donker Heer ontbied . . . Hulle sê dis syne hierdie," en sy bekyk die swartdoringtowerstaf van naby, "maar dit stem nie ooreen met Ollivander se beskrywing nie . . . As ons verkeerd is, as ons die Donker Heer verniet hierheen ontbied . . . Onthou wat hy met Rowle en Dolohof gedoen het!"

"Wat dan van die Modderbloed?" grom Greyback. Harry val amper soos die Grypers die gevangenes weer dwing om al malende om te draai sodat die lig nou op Hermione val.

"Wag," sê Narcissa skerp. "Ja – ja, sy was saam met Potter in Madame Malkin se winkel! Ek het haar foto in die *Profeet* gesien! Kyk, Draco, is dit nie die Granger-meisie nie?"

"Ek . . . miskien . . . ja."

"Maar dan is dit die Weasley-seun daai!" roep Lucius uit en loop om die vasgebinde gevangenes tot voor Ron. "Dis hulle, Potter se vriende – Draco, kyk na hom. Is dit nie Arthur Weasley se seun nie, watsenaam –?"

"Ja," sê Draco weer, met sy rug na die gevangenes. "Dit kan wees."

Die sitkamerdeur gaan agter Harry oop. 'n Vrou praat en die klank van die stem laat Harry se vrees selfs nóg 'n kerf hoër styg.

"Wat is dit? Wat het gebeur, Cissy?"

Bellatrix Lestrange loop stadig om die gevangenes, stop regs van Harry en staar deur haar swaar ooglede na Hermione.

"Maar dis tog sekerlik die Modderbloedmeisie?" sê sy sag. "Dis Granger, dan nie?"

"Ja, ja, dis Granger!" roep Lucius uit. "En langs haar, dink ons, is Potter! Potter en sy vriende, uiteindelik gevang!"

"Potter?" roep Bellatrix uit en sy staan terug om Harry beter te kan sien. "Is jy seker? Wel, dan moet die Donker Heer dadelik in kennis gestel word!"

Sy trek haar linkermou op: Harry sien die Donker Mark wat in haar arm se vleis ingebrand is, en weet sy gaan daaraan raak en haar geliefde meester ontbied –

"Ek was op die punt om hom te roep!" sê Lucius en sy hand sluit om Bellatrix se pols sodat sy nie aan die Merk kan raak nie. "*Ek* sal hom ontbied, Bella. Potter is na my huis toe gebring en dit is dus op my gesag wat –"

"Jou gesag!" sê sy smalend en probeer haar hand uit sy greep losruk. "Jy het jou gesag verloor toe jy jou towerstaf verloor het, Lucius! Hoe durf jy? Haal jou hande van my af!"

"Dit het niks met jou uit te waai nie. Dis nie jy wat die seun gevang het nie –"

"Verskoon my, *meneer* Malfoy," val Greyback hom in die rede, "maar dis ons wat Potter gevang het, en dis ons wat die goud gaan eis –"

"Goud!" lag Bellatrix wat nog steeds van haar swaer probeer loskom en met haar los hand in haar sak rondtas op soek na haar

towerstaf. "Vat jou goud, vieslike aasvreter, wat wil ek met goud maak? Al wat ek begeer, is die eer van sy – van –"

Sy hou op om haar teë te sit, haar oë vasgenael op iets wat Harry nie kan sien nie. Verheug dat sy toegee, smyt Lucius haar hand weg van hom en pluk sy eie mou op –

"STOP!" gil Bellatrix. "Moenie daaraan raak nie. Ons sal almal omkom as die Donker Heer nou hier opdaag!"

Lucius vries, sy wysvinger huiwerend bo sy eie Merk. Bellatrix beweeg uit Harry se gesigsveld.

"Wat is dit daardie?" hoor hy haar vra.

"'n Swaard," grom 'n Gryper wat hy nie kan sien nie.

"Gee dit hier."

"Dis nie joune nie, mevrou, dis myne, ek het dit gekry."

Daar is 'n slag en 'n rooi lig flits: Harry weet die Gryper is Bedwelm. Sy makkers brul van woede; Scabior pluk sy towerstaf uit.

"Wat dink jy doen jy, vroumens?"

"*Bedwelm!*" skree sy. "*Bedwelm!*"

Hulle is nie teen haar opgewasse nie, selfs al is dit vier teen een: Harry weet sy is 'n heks met verbasende vaardigheid en geen gewete nie. Hulle val waar hulle staan, almal behalwe Greyback, wat gedwing word om met uitgestrekte arms te kniel. Uit die hoeke van sy oë sien Harry hoe Bellatrix op die weerwolf afpyl met Gryffindor se swaard stewig in haar hand, haar gesig wasbleek.

"Waar het julle hierdie swaard gekry?" fluister sy vir Greyback en trek sy towerstaf uit sy weerstandlose greep; hy kan nie weerstand bied nie.

"Hoe durf jy?" grom hy. Sy mond is die enigste ding wat kan beweeg terwyl hy gedwing word om na haar te kyk. Hy ontbloot sy gepunte tande. "Laat los my, vroumens!"

"Waar het julle hierdie swaard gekry?" herhaal sy en swaai dit in sy gesig rond. "Snape het dit na my kluis in Gringotts gestuur!"

"Dit was in hulle tent," kras Greyback. "Laat los my nou!"

Sy swaai haar towerstaf en die weerwolf spring op, maar lyk lugtig om nader te kom. Hy sluip agter 'n leunstoel rond en boor met sy vieslike krom naels in die rugleuning.

"Draco, vat die skuim buitentoe," sê Bellatrix en wys na die bewustelose mans. "As jy nie die moed het om met hulle klaar te speel nie, los hulle dan vir my in die binnehof."

"Hoe durf jy so met Draco praat?" sê Narcissa woedend, maar Bellatrix skree: "Bly stil! Jy't nie die vaagste benul hoe gevaarlik die situasie is nie, Cissy! Ons het 'n baie ernstige probleem!"

Sy hyg effens terwyl sy afkyk na die swaard en die hef ondersoek. Dan draai sy om en kyk na die stil gevangenes.

"As dit inderdaad Potter is, mag hy nie iets aangedoen word nie," mompel sy by haarself. "Die Donker Heer wil Potter self uit die weg ruim ... maar as hy uitvind . . . Ek moet . . . ek moet weet . . ."

Sy draai weer terug na haar suster.

"Die gevangenes moet in die kelder gesit word terwyl ek dink wat om te doen!"

"Dit is my huis hierdie, Bella, jy gee nie bevele in my –"

"Doen dit! Jy het nie 'n idee in watter gevaar ons verkeer nie!" skree Bellatrix. Sy lyk skrikaanjaend, mal; 'n dun straaltjie vuur kom by haar towerstaf uit en brand 'n gat in die tapyt.

Narcissa aarsel vir 'n oomblik, dan spreek sy die weerwolf aan.

"Neem hierdie gevangenes af kelder toe, Greyback."

"Wag," sê Bellatrix skerp. "Almal behalwe . . . behalwe die Modderbloed."

Greyback snork van plesier.

"Nee!" skree Ron. "Vat my, hou my!"

Bellatrix slaan hom deur die gesig; die hou weerklink deur die vertrek.

"As sy tydens ondervraging doodgaan, sal ek jou volgende vat," sê sy. "'n Bloedverraaier is wat my betref net so erg soos 'n Modderbloed. Vat hulle ondertoe, Greyback, en maak seker hulle is stewig vasgebind, maar moet niks meer aan hulle doen nie – nog nie."

Sy gooi Greyback se towerstaf vir hom terug en haal 'n kort silwer mes onder haar kleed uit. Sy sny Hermione los van die ander gevangenes en sleep haar aan die hare tot in die middel van die vertrek. Greyback dwing die res van hulle om aan te skuifel na 'n ander deur toe en dan by 'n donker gang in; hy hou sy towerstaf voor hom op en dit straal 'n onsigbare krag uit.

"Hoop sy los vir my 'n bietjie van daai meisie oor wanneer sy klaar is met haar," singsê Greyback terwyl hy hulle in die gang af boender. "Ek dink ek sal darem 'n happie of twee kry, nè, Rooies?"

Harry voel Ron ruk. Hulle word by 'n stel trappe afgedwing, nog steeds rug-teen-rug vasgebind; iemand kan enige oomblik gly en sy nek breek. Aan die onderkant is daar 'n swaar deur. Greyback sluit dit oop deur met sy towerstaf daarop te tik, druk hulle dan by 'n klam, muwwerige vertrek in en laat hulle in totale duister agter. Die eggo van die kelderdeur wat toegegooi is, het nog nie weggesterf nie toe hulle 'n aaklige, uitgerekte gil van direk bokant hulle af hoor.

"HERMIONE!" brul Ron en hy begin so te spartel en stoei teen

die toue waarmee hulle aan mekaar vasgebind is dat Harry amper val. "HERMIONE!"

"Bly stil!" sê Harry. "Sjarrap, Ron, ons moet 'n manier uitwerk hoe –"

"HERMIONE! HERMIONE!"

"Ons moet 'n plan maak, hou op gil – ons moet hierdie toue loskry –"

"Harry?" fluister iemand in die donker. "Ron? Is dit julle?"

Ron hou op gil. Daar is 'n geluid van 'n beweging naby hulle, dan sien Harry 'n skaduwee wat nader beweeg.

"Harry? Ron?"

"Luna?"

"Ja, dis ek! Ai tog, ek wou nie hê julle moes gevang word nie!"

"Luna, kan jy ons help om hierdie toue los te kry?" vra Harry.

"O ja, ek dink so . . . Hier's 'n ou spyker wat ons gebruik as ons iets wil breek . . . net 'n oomblik . . ."

Hermione skree weer bokant hulle en hulle kan Bellatrix ook hoor skree, maar hulle kan nie uitmaak wat sy sê nie, want Ron gil weer: "HERMIONE! HERMIONE!"

"Meneer Ollivander?" hoor Harry Luna sê. "Meneer Ollivander, het jy die spyker? Skuif net so 'n bietjie op . . . Ek dink dit was langs die waterbeker . . ."

Sy is binne sekondes terug.

"Julle sal moet stilstaan," sê sy.

Harry voel hoe bewerk sy die tou se taai vesels om die knope te probeer loskry. Hulle hoor Bellatrix se stem van bo af.

"Ek gaan jou nou weer vra! Waar het julle hierdie swaard gekry? *Waar?*"

"Ons het dit gekry – ons het dit gekry – ASSEBLIEF!" skree Hermione weer. Ron spartel harder as ooit en die geroeste spyker glip tot op Harry se pols.

"Ron, staan asseblief stil!" fluister Luna. "Ek kan nie sien wat ek doen nie –"

"My sak!" sê Ron. "In my sak is daar 'n Afskakelaar, en dis vol lig!"

'n Paar sekondes later is daar 'n klikgeluid en die ligballe wat die Afskakelaar uit die lampe in die tent opgesuig het, vlieg by die kelder in. Aangesien hulle nie na hulle bronne kan teruggaan nie, hang hulle eenvoudig net daar, soos klein sonnetjies, en verlig die ondergrondse vertrek. Harry sien Luna, die ene oë en spierwit in die gesig, en Ollivander, die towerstafmaker, se beweginglose liggaam wat in die hoek op die vloer opgekrul lê. Hy kyk om en sien hulle

medegevangenes: Dean en Griphook, die kabouter, wat lyk of hy beswaarlik by sy bewussyn is, maar regop gehou word deur die toue wat hom aan die mense vasbind.

"O, dis baie makliker, dankie, Ron," sê Luna en sy begin kap weer aan die toue. "Hallo, Dean!"

Bellatrix se stem kom van bo af.

"Jy lieg, jou vieslike Modderbloed, en ek weet dit! Julle was in my kluis in Gringotts! Praat die waarheid, *praat die waarheid!*"

Nog 'n aaklige gil –

"HERMIONE!"

"Wat het julle nog gevat? Wat het julle nog? Vertel my die waarheid of ek sweer ek steek hierdie mes deur jou!"

"Daar's hy!"

Harry voel die toue van hom afval en terwyl hy sy polse vryf, sien hy hoe Ron in die kelder rondhardloop, die lae plafon bekyk en na 'n valdeur soek. Dean, sy gesig gekneus en bebloed, bedank Luna en staan bewend daar, maar Griphook sak op die vloer neer en lyk half bedwelm en gedisoriënteer, sy blas gesig vol opgehewe hale.

Ron probeer nou om sonder 'n towerstaf te Disappareer.

"'n Mens kan nie hier uitkom nie, Ron," sê Luna wat sy vrugtelose pogings dophou. "Die kelder is heeltemal bestand teen ontsnapping. Ek het ook probeer toe ek hier aangekom het. Meneer Ollivander is lankal hier; hy't al alles probeer."

Hermione skree weer: die geluid sny deur Harry soos fisieke pyn. Skaars bewus van sy litteken wat so skerp prik, begin hy ook in die kelder rondhardloop en bevoel die mure vir hy weet skaars wat terwyl hy in sy hart weet dit is nutteloos.

"Wat het julle nog gevat? ANTWOORD MY! CRUCIO!"

Hermione se gille weergalm teen die bokantse mure. Ron hamer snikkend met sy vuiste teen die mure en van pure wanhoop gryp Harry Hagrid se sakkie om sy nek en voel daarin rond: hy haal Dumbledore se Snip uit en skud dit, hopende vir hy weet nie wat nie – en niks gebeur nie; hy swaai die gebreekte helftes van die fenikstowerstaf rond, maar hulle is leweloos – die spieëlskerf val glinsterend op die vloer en hy sien 'n flikkering van die helderste blou –

Dumbledore se oog staar uit die spieël op na hom.

"Help ons!" gil hy waansinnig van desperaatheid. "Ons is in die Malfoy-huis se kelder, help ons!"

Die oog knipper en dan is dit weg.

Harry is nie eens seker of dit regtig daar was nie. Hy hou die stukkie spieël skuins, eers na die een en dan na die ander kant toe,

maar al wat daarin weerkaats, is hulle tronk se mure en plafon, en bokant skree Hermione erger as ooit, en langs hom bulder Ron: "HERMIONE! HERMIONE!"

"Hoe het julle by my kluis ingekom?" hoor hulle Bellatrix skree. "Het daardie vieslike kabouter in die kelder julle gehelp?"

"Ons het hom eers vanaand ontmoet!" snik Hermione. "Ons was nog nooit in jou kluis nie . . . Dis nie die regte swaard nie! Dis 'n namaaksel, net 'n namaaksel!"

"'n Namaaksel?" skreeu Bellatrix. "O, nog 'n liegstorie!"

"Maar ons kan maklik uitvind!" kom Lucius se stem. "Draco, gaan haal die kabouter. Hy kan vir ons sê of die swaard eg is of nie!"

Harry vlieg deur die kelder na waar Griphook in 'n hopie op die vloer lê.

"Griphook," fluister hy in die kabouter se gepunte oor, "jy moet vir hulle sê die swaard is vervals. Hulle mag nie weet dis die regte een nie, Griphook, asseblief –"

Hy kan hoor hoe iemand haastig by die kelder se trap afkom; die volgende oomblik praat Draco se bewende stem van agter die deur.

"Staan terug. Staan in 'n ry teen die agterste muur. Moet niks probeer nie, of ek maak julle dood!"

Hulle maak soos hulle aangesê is. Toe die slot draai, klik Ron die Afskakelaar: die ligte wip terug in sy sak en die kelder is weer donker. Die deur vlieg oop; Malfoy marsjeer in met sy towerstaf voor hom uit, bleek en vasberade. Hy gryp die kaboutertjie aan die arm en retireer buitentoe terwyl hy Griphook saam met hom sleep. Die deur klap toe en terselfdertyd eggo 'n harde *kraak* deur die kelder.

Ron klik die Afskakelaar. Drie ligballe vlieg weer uit sy sak in die lug in en verlig Dobby die huiself, wat so pas in hulle midde ge-Appareer het.

"DOB –"

Harry klap Ron op die arm om hom stil te maak, en Ron lyk verskrik oor sy fout. Voetstappe beweeg oor die plafon bo hulle: Draco marsjeer met Griphook na Bellatrix toe.

Dobby se enorme tennisbaloë is wydgerek; hy bewe van sy voete tot die punte van sy ore. Hy is terug in sy gewese meesters se huis en is duidelik vreesbevange.

"Harry Potter," piep hy in 'n bewerige stemmetjie, "Dobby het jou kom red."

"Maar hoe het jy –?"

'n Aaklige gil smoor Harry se woorde: Hermione word weer gemartel. Hy kom dadelik tot die punt.

"Kan jy uit hierdie kelder Disappareer?" vra hy vir Dobby, wat met flappende ore knik.

"En kan jy mense saam met jou vat?"

Dobby knik weer.

"Reg, Dobby, ek wil hê jy moet Luna, Dean en meneer Ollivander neem en hulle wegvat na – wegvat na –"

"Bill en Fleur se huis," sê Ron. "Die Skulphuisie, 'n entjie buitekant Tinworth!"

Die elf knik 'n derde keer.

"En kom dan terug," sê Harry. "Kan jy dit doen, Dobby?"

"Natuurlik, Harry Potter," fluister die elfie. Hy haas hom na meneer Ollivander wat beswaarlik lyk of hy by sy bewussyn is. Hy vat een van die towenaar se hande in syne, en hou die ander een uit na Luna en Dean, wat nie een beweeg nie.

"Harry, ons wil jou help!" fluister Luna.

"Ons kan jou nie hier los nie," sê Dean.

"Gaan, al twee van julle! Ons sien julle by Bill en Fleur se huis!"

Terwyl Harry praat, brand sy litteken erger as ooit, en hy kyk vir 'n paar sekondes af, nie na die towerstafmaker nie, maar na 'n ander man wat net so oud en net so maer is, maar minagtend lag.

"Maak my dan dood, Voldemort, ek verwelkom die dood! Maar my dood sal nie dit waarna jy soek aan jou besorg nie . . . Daar is soveel wat jy nie verstaan nie . . ."

Harry voel Voldemort se woede, maar Hermione skree weer en hy sluit hom af daarvan en keer terug na die kelder en die afgryslike situasie waarin hy hom bevind.

"Gaan!" pleit Harry by Luna en Dean. "Gaan! Ons kom later, gaan net!"

Hulle kry die elf se uitgestrekte vingers beet. Daar is nog 'n harde *kraak* en Dobby, Luna, Dean en Ollivander verdwyn.

"Wat was dit?" roep Lucius Malfoy bokant hulle uit. "Het julle dit gehoor? Wat was daardie geluid in die kelder?"

Harry en Ron staar na mekaar.

"Draco – nee, roep Wurmstert! Laat hy gaan kyk wat aangaan!"

Voetstappe beweeg deur die vertrek bokant, dan is daar stilte. Harry weet die mense in die sitkamer luister om te hoor of daar nog geluide uit die kelder kom.

"Ons sal hom moet probeer laagvat," fluister hy vir Ron. Hulle het nie 'n keuse nie: die oomblik dat iemand by die kelder inkom en sien drie van die gevangenes is weg, is dit klaarpraat met hulle. "Los die ligte aan," voeg Harry by, en toe hulle iemand by die trap buite die deur hoor afkom, gaan staan hulle weerskante daarvan teen die muur.

"Staan weg," kom Wurmstert se stem. "Staan weg van die deur af. Ek kom in."

Die deur vlieg oop. 'n Breukdeel van 'n sekonde lank staar Wurmstert in by die skynbaar leë kelder wat helder verlig word deur die drie miniatuursonne wat in die lug sweef. Dan bespring Harry en Ron hom. Ron gryp Wurmstert se towerstafarm en dwing dit boontoe; Harry klap 'n hand oor sy mond en demp sy stem. Hulle worstel in stilte: Wurmstert se towerstaf skiet vonke; sy silwer hand sluit om Harry se keel.

"Wat gaan aan, Wurmstert?" roep Lucius Malfoy van bo af.

"Niks!" roep Ron terug in 'n gangbare nabootsing van Wurmstert se aamborstige stem. "Als is oukei!"

Harry kan skaars asemhaal.

"Gaan jy my doodmaak?" vra Harry wurgend terwyl hy die metaalvingers probeer loswikkel. "Nadat ek jou lewe gered het? Jy skuld my, Wurmstert!"

Die silwer vingers verslap. Harry het dit nie verwag nie: hy ruk hom verstom los terwyl hy sy hand nog oor Wurmstert se mond hou. Hy sien hoe die rotagtige man se klein, waterige ogies van vrees en verrassing rek: hy lyk net so geskok soos Harry oor wat sy hand gedoen het, oor die oomblik van genade wat dit betoon het, en hy gaan voort om nog erger te worstel asof hy daardie oomblik van swakheid ongedaan wil maak.

"En ons sal dit neem," fluister Ron terwyl hy Wurmstert se towerstaf uit sy ander hand trek.

Sonder sy towerstaf en hulpeloos, vergroot Pettigrew se pupille van vrees. Sy oë gly van Harry se gesig na iets anders. Sy silwer vingers beweeg meedoënloos na sy eie keel toe.

"Nee –"

Sonder om te dink, probeer Harry die hand terugdruk, maar hy kry dit nie reg nie. Die silwer stuk gereedskap wat Voldemort vir sy lafhartigste handlanger gegee het, draai nou teen sy Ontwapende en nuttelose eienaar. Pettigrew word beloon vir sy huiwering, sy oomblik van bejammering: hy word voor hulle oë verwurg.

"Nee!"

Ron het Wurmstert ook gelos en hy en Harry probeer saam om die vergruisende metaalvingers van Wurmstert se keel af te kry, maar dit help nie. Pettigrew word blou.

"Relashio!" sê Ron en wys met die towerstaf na die silwer hand, maar niks gebeur nie. Pettigrew sink op sy knieë neer en terselfdertyd gee Hermione 'n afgryslike gil bokant hulle. Wurmstert se oë rol boontoe in sy pers gesig, hy gee 'n laaste stuiptrekking en is stil.

Harry en Ron kyk na mekaar, dan los hulle Wurmstert se liggaam op die vloer, hardloop by die trap op en terug met die gang vol skaduwees na die sitkamer toe. Hulle sluip versigtig tot by die sitkamerdeur wat op 'n skrefie oopstaan. Hulle kan nou duidelik sien hoe Bellatrix afkyk na Griphook wat Gryffindor se swaard in sy hande met die lang vingers vashou. Hermione lê by Bellatrix se voete. Sy roer skaars.

"Wel?" sê Bellatrix vir Griphook. "Is dit die regte swaard?"

Harry wag, hou sy asem op, veg teen sy litteken se prikkeling.

"Nee," sê Griphook. "Dis 'n namaaksel."

"Is jy seker?" hyg Bellatrix. "Heeltemal seker?"

"Ja," sê die kabouter.

Verligting spoel oor haar gesig en al die spanning dreineer daaruit.

"Mooi," sê sy en met 'n terloopse swiep van haar towerstaf kerf sy nog 'n diep sny in die kabouter se gesig en hy val met 'n gil aan haar voete neer. Sy skop hom opsy. "En nou," sê sy in 'n stem wat breek van triomf, "sal ons die Donker Heer laat kom!"

En sy trek haar mou op en raak met haar voorvinger aan die Donker Merk.

Harry se litteken voel of dit weer oopgebars het. Sy werklike omgewing verdwyn: hy is Voldemort, en die skeletagtige towenaar voor hom lag tandeloos vir hom; hy is woedend omdat hy ontbied word – hy het hulle gewaarsku, hy het vir hulle gesê om hom vir niks anders as Potter te ontbied nie. As hulle verkeerd is . . .

"Maak my dan dood!" dring die ou man aan. *"Jy sal nie wen nie, jy kan nie wen nie! Daardie towerstaf sal nooit ooit joune wees nie –"*

En Voldemort se woede kry die oorhand: 'n ontploffing van groen lig vul die tronkkamer en die brose ou liggaam word van die harde bed af opgelig en val dan leweloos terug. Voldemort draai terug na die venster, skaars in staat om sy woede te beheer . . . hulle gaan sy vergelding verduur as hulle nie 'n goeie rede het om hom te roep nie . . .

"En ek dink," sê Bellatrix se stem, "ons kan van die Modderbloed ontslae raak. Greyback, vat haar as jy haar wil hê."

"NEEEEEEEEEE!"

Ron bars by die sitkamer in; Bellatrix kyk geskok om; sy draai haar towerstaf na Ron toe –

"Expelliarmus!" brul hy en mik met Wurmstert se towerstaf na Bellatrix. Haar towerstaf vlieg in die lug op en Harry, wat agter Ron aangehardloop het, vang dit. Lucius, Narcissa, Draco en Greyback swaai om; Harry gil: *"Bedwelm!"* en Lucius Malfoy sak teen die

vuurherd inmekaar. Ligstrale vlieg uit Draco, Narcissa en Greyback se towerstawwe; Harry val plat op die vloer en rol agter 'n rusbank in om dit te ontwyk.

"STOP OF SY'S DOOD!"

Harry loer hygend om die kant van die rusbank. Bellatrix stut Hermione, wat blykbaar bewusteloos is, en hou haar kort silwer mes teen Hermione se keel.

"Laat val julle towerstawwe," fluister sy. "Laat val hulle, of ons gaan sien presies hoe vieslik haar bloed is!"

Ron staar versteen terwyl hy Wurmstert se towerstaf krampagtig vashou. Harry kom regop met Bellatrix s'n nog steeds in sy hand.

"Ek het gesê laat val hulle!" skree sy skril en druk die lem in Hermione se keel: Harry sien druppels bloed verskyn.

"Oukei!" roep hy uit en laat val Bellatrix se towerstaf op die vloer by sy voete. Ron doen dieselfde met Wurmstert s'n. Albei lig hulle hande skouerhoogte.

"Mooi!" sê sy grynsend. "Draco, tel hulle op! Die Donker Heer is op pad, Harry Potter! Jou dood kom nader!"

Harry weet dit; sy litteken bars van die pyn, en hy kan voel hoe vlieg Voldemort deur die lug van ver weg, oor 'n donker en stormagtige see, en binnekort sal hy naby genoeg wees om na hulle toe te Appareer, en Harry sien nêrens 'n wegkomkans nie.

"Reg," sê Bellatrix sag toe Draco vinnig met die towerstawwe terugkom, "Cissy, ek dink ons moet hierdie klein heldjies weer vasbind terwyl Greyback met juffrou Modderbloed afreken. Ek is seker ná wat jy vanaand gedoen het, sal die Donker Heer jou nie die meisie misgun nie, Greyback."

Met die laaste woord kom daar 'n eienaardige skuurgeluid van bo af. Almal kyk betyds op om die kristalkroonkandelaar te sien bewe; dan begin dit met 'n kraak en 'n onheilspellende gerinkel neerstort. Bellatrix staan reg daaronder; sy laat val Hermione en gooi haarself gillend eenkant toe. Die kroonkandelaar stort met 'n ontploffing van glas en kettings op die vloer neer, bo-op Hermione en die kabouter wat nog steeds aan Gryffindor se swaard vasklou. Glinsterende kristalskerwe vlieg in alle rigtings: Draco vou dubbel met sy hande oor sy bebloede gesig.

Terwyl Ron hardloop om Hermione onder die puin uit te kry, neem Harry sy kans waar; hy spring oor 'n leunstoel en ruk die drie towerstawwe uit Draco se greep, mik met al drie na Greyback en gil: *"Bedwelm!"* Die driedubbele towerspreuk lig die weerwolf van sy voete af; hy skiet op plafon toe en val hom dan te pletter op die vloer.

Terwyl Narcissa Draco uit die pad van verdere gevaar sleep, spring Bellatrix met vlieënde hare op en swaai die silwer mes rond, maar Narcissa mik met haar towerstaf na die deuringang toe.

"Dobby!" skree sy en selfs Bellatrix vries. "Jy! *Jy* het die kandelaar laat val –?"

Die klein elfie trippel by die vertrek in en wys met 'n bewende vinger na sy gewese meesteres.

"Julle moenie vir Harry Potter seermaak nie," piep hy.

"Maak hom dood, Cissy!" gil Bellatrix, maar daar is nog 'n harde *kraak* en Narcissa se towerstaf vlieg ook in die lug op en beland aan die ander kant van die vertrek.

"Jou vieslike klein pes!" bulder Bellatrix. "Hoe durf jy 'n heks se towerstaf vat, hoe durf jy jou meesters trotseer?"

"Dobby het nie 'n meester nie!" kraai die elf. "Dobby is 'n vry elf en Dobby het Harry Potter en sy vriende kom red!"

Harry se litteken verblind hom nou van pyn. Hy weet vaagweg hulle het net oomblikke, sekondes oor voor Voldemort by hulle gaan wees.

"Ron, vang – en GEE PAD!" gil hy terwyl hy vir hom een van die towerstawwe gooi; dan buk hy af om Griphook onder die kroonkandelaar uit te trek. Hy hys die kreunende kabouter, wat nog steeds aan die swaard vasklou, op tot oor sy skouer, gryp Dobby se hand en tol op een plek in die rondte om te Disappareer.

Terwyl hy die duisternis in draai, sien hy die sitkamer vir oulaas skrams: Narcissa en Draco se bleek, versteende figure, 'n rooi strook wat Ron se hare moet wees, en 'n waas van vlieënde silwer soos Bellatrix se mes deur die vertrek vlieg na die plek waar hy verdwyn –

Bill en Fleur se huis . . . die Skulphuisie . . . Bill en Fleur se huis . . .

Hy het die onbekende in verdwyn; al wat hy kan doen, is om die bestemming se naam te herhaal en te hoop dit sal genoeg wees om hom soontoe te neem. Die pyn in sy voorkop deurboor hom en die kabouter se gewig druk swaar op hom; hy voel die lem van Gryffindor se swaard teen sy rug stamp; Dobby se hand ruk in syne; hy wonder of die elf beheer probeer oorneem om hulle in die regte rigting te trek en gee die vingers 'n drukkie om te wys dit is in die haak met hom . . .

En dan tref hulle soliede aarde en ruik sout lug. Harry val op sy knieë, laat los Dobby se hand en probeer om Griphook saggies op die grond neer te sit.

"Is jy oukei?" vra hy toe die kabouter roer, maar Griphook kreun net.

Harry kyk met skrefiesoë in die donker rond. Dit lyk of daar 'n

huisie 'n entjie verder onder die wye, sterbesaaide lug is, en hy dink hy sien beweging buitekant.

"Dobby, is dit die Skulphuisie?" fluister hy terwyl hy die twee towerstawwe wat hy van die Malfoys af gebring het, vasklou, gereed om te veg as dit nodig is. "Het ons na die regte plek toe gekom? Dobby?"

Hy kyk om. Die elfie staan 'n paar tree van hom af.

"DOBBY!"

Die elf wieg effens en sterre weerkaats in sy wye, blink oë. Saam kyk hy en Harry af na die silwer hef van die mes wat by die elf se hygende borskas uitsteek.

"Dobby – nee – HELP!" bulder Harry na die huis toe, na die mense wat daar rondbeweeg. "HELP!"

Hy weet nie en gee nie om of hulle towenaars of Moggels, vriende of vyande is nie; al waaraan hy kan dink, is dat daar 'n donker vlek oor Dobby se borskas versprei en dat hy sy dun armpies met 'n smekende uitdrukking na Harry toe uitstrek. Harry vang hom en lê hom op sy sy op die koel gras neer.

"Dobby, nee, moenie doodgaan nie, moenie doodgaan nie –"

Die elf se oë vind hom en sy lippe bewe van inspanning om die woorde te vorm.

"Harry . . . Potter . . ."

En dan gee die elf 'n effense stuiptrekking, verstil heeltemal en sy oë is net groot, glaserige sfere besprinkel met lig van die sterre wat hulle nie kan sien nie.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



THE WANDMAKER

It was like sinking into an old nightmare; for an instant Harry knelt again beside Dumbledore's body at the foot of the tallest tower at Hogwarts, but in reality he was staring at a tiny body curled upon the grass, pierced by Bellatrix's silver knife. Harry's voice was still saying, "Dobby . . . *Dobby* . . ." even though he knew that the elf had gone where he could not call him back.

After a minute or so he realized that they had, after all, come to the right place, for here were Bill and Fleur, Dean and Luna, gathering around him as he knelt over the elf.

"Hermione?" he said suddenly. "Where is she?"

"Ron's taken her inside," said Bill. "She'll be all right."

Harry looked back down at Dobby. He stretched out a hand and

pulled the sharp blade from the elf's body, then dragged off his own jacket and covered Dobby in it like a blanket.

The sea was rushing against rock somewhere nearby; Harry listened to it while the others talked, discussing matters in which he could take no interest, making decisions. Dean carried the injured Griphook into the house, Fleur hurrying with them; now Bill was making suggestions about burying the elf. Harry agreed without really knowing what he was saying. As he did so, he gazed down at the tiny body, and his scar prickled and burned, and in one part of his mind, viewed as if from the wrong end of a long telescope, he saw Voldemort punishing those they had left behind at Malfoy Manor. His rage was dreadful and yet Harry's grief for Dobby seemed to diminish it, so that it became a distant storm that reached Harry from across a vast, silent ocean.

"I want to do it properly," were the first words of which Harry was fully conscious of speaking. "Not by magic. Have you got a spade?"

And shortly afterward he had set to work, alone, digging the grave in the place that Bill had shown him at the end of the garden, between bushes. He dug with a kind of fury, relishing the manual work, glorying in the non-magic of it, for every drop of his sweat and every blister felt like a gift to the elf who had saved their lives.

His scar burned, but he was master of the pain; he felt it, yet was apart from it. He had learned control at last, learned to shut his mind to Voldemort, the very thing Dumbledore had wanted him to learn from Snape. Just as Voldemort had not been able to possess Harry while Harry was consumed with grief for Sirius, so his thoughts

could not penetrate Harry now, while he mourned Dobby. Grief, it seemed, drove Voldemort out . . . though Dumbledore, of course, would have said that it was love. . . .

On Harry dug, deeper and deeper into the hard, cold earth, subsuming his grief in sweat, denying the pain in his scar. In the darkness, with nothing but the sound of his own breath and the rushing sea to keep him company, the things that had happened at the Malfoys' returned to him, the things he had heard came back to him, and understanding blossomed in the darkness. . . .

The steady rhythm of his arms beat time with his thoughts. Hallows . . . Horcruxes . . . Hallows . . . Horcruxes . . . Yet he no longer burned with that weird, obsessive longing. Loss and fear had snuffed it out: He felt as though he had been slapped awake again.

Deeper and deeper Harry sank into the grave, and he knew where Voldemort had been tonight, and whom he had killed in the topmost cell of Nurmengard, and why. . . .

And he thought of Wormtail, dead because of one small unconscious impulse of mercy . . . Dumbledore had foreseen that. . . . How much more had he known?

Harry lost track of time. He knew only that the darkness had lightened a few degrees when he was rejoined by Ron and Dean.

"How's Hermione?"

"Better," said Ron. "Fleur's looking after her."

Harry had his retort ready for when they asked him why he had not simply created a perfect grave with his wand, but he did not need it. They jumped down into the hole he had made with spades of their own, and together they worked in silence until the hole seemed deep

enough.

Harry wrapped the elf more snugly in his jacket. Ron sat on the edge of the grave and stripped off his shoes and socks, which he placed upon the elf's bare feet. Dean produced a woolen hat, which Harry placed carefully upon Dobby's head, muffling his batlike ears.

"We should close his eyes."

Harry had not heard the others coming through the darkness. Bill was wearing a traveling cloak, Fleur a large white apron, from the pocket of which protruded a bottle of what Harry recognized to be Skele-Gro. Hermione was wrapped in a borrowed dressing gown, pale and unsteady on her feet; Ron put an arm around her when she reached him. Luna, who was huddled in one of Fleur's coats, crouched down and placed her fingers tenderly upon each of the elf's eyelids, sliding them over his glassy stare.

"There," she said softly. "Now he could be sleeping."

Harry placed the elf into the grave, arranged his tiny limbs so that he might have been resting, then climbed out and gazed for the last time upon the little body. He forced himself not to break down as he remembered Dumbledore's funeral, and the rows and rows of golden chairs, and the Minister of Magic in the front row, the recitation of Dumbledore's achievements, the stateliness of the white marble tomb. He felt that Dobby deserved just as grand a funeral, and yet here the elf lay between bushes in a roughly dug hole.

"I think we ought to say something," piped up Luna. "I'll go first, shall I?"

And as everybody looked at her, she addressed the dead elf at the bottom of the grave.

"Thank you so much, Dobby, for rescuing me from that cellar. It's so unfair that you had to die, when you were so good and brave. I'll always remember what you did for us. I hope you're happy now."

She turned and looked expectantly at Ron, who cleared his throat and said in a thick voice, "Yeah . . . thanks, Dobby."

"Thanks," muttered Dean.

Harry swallowed.

"Good-bye, Dobby," he said. It was all he could manage, but Luna had said it all for him. Bill raised his wand, and the pile of earth beside the grave rose up into the air and fell neatly upon it, a small, reddish mound.

"D'you mind if I stay here a moment?" he asked the others.

They murmured words he did not catch; he felt gentle pats upon his back, and then they all traipsed back toward the cottage, leaving Harry alone beside the elf.

He looked around: There were a number of large white stones, smoothed by the sea, marking the edge of the flower beds. He picked up one of the largest and laid it, pillowlike, over the place where Dobby's head now rested. He then felt in his pocket for a wand.

There were two in there. He had forgotten, lost track; he could not now remember whose wands these were; he seemed to remember wrenching them out of someone's hand. He selected the shorter of the two, which felt friendlier in his hand, and pointed it at the rock.

Slowly, under his murmured instruction, deep cuts appeared upon the rock's surface. He knew that Hermione could have done it more neatly, and probably more quickly, but he wanted to mark the spot as he had wanted to dig the grave. When Harry stood up again, the stone

read:

HERE LIES DOBBY, A FREE ELF.

He looked down at his handiwork for a few more seconds, then walked away, his scar still prickling a little, and his mind full of those things that had come to him in the grave, ideas that had taken shape in the darkness, ideas both fascinating and terrible.

They were all sitting in the living room when he entered the little hall, their attention focused upon Bill, who was talking. The room was light-colored, pretty, with a small fire of driftwood burning brightly in the fireplace. Harry did not want to drop mud upon the carpet, so he stood in the doorway, listening.

". . . lucky that Ginny's on holiday. If she'd been at Hogwarts, they could have taken her before we reached her. Now we know she's safe too."

He looked around and saw Harry standing there.

"I've been getting them all out of the Burrow," he explained. "Moved them to Muriel's. The Death Eaters know Ron's with you now, they're bound to target the family — don't apologize," he added at the sight of Harry's expression. "It was always a matter of time, Dad's been saying so for months. We're the biggest blood-traitor family there is."

"How are they protected?" asked Harry.

"Fidelius Charm. Dad's Secret-Keeper. And we've done it on this cottage too; I'm Secret-Keeper here. None of us can go to work, but that's hardly the most important thing now. Once Ollivander and Griphook are well enough, we'll move them to Muriel's too. There

isn't much room here, but she's got plenty. Griphook's legs are on the mend, Fleur's given him Skele-Gro; we could probably move them in an hour or —"

"No," Harry said, and Bill looked startled. "I need both of them here. I need to talk to them. It's important."

He heard the authority in his own voice, the conviction, the sense of purpose that had come to him as he dug Dobby's grave. All of their faces were turned toward him, looking puzzled.

"I'm going to wash," Harry told Bill, looking down at his hands, still covered in mud and Dobby's blood. "Then I'll need to see them, straightaway."

He walked into the little kitchen, to the basin beneath a window overlooking the sea. Dawn was breaking over the horizon, shell pink and faintly gold, as he washed, again following the train of thought that had come to him in the dark garden. . . .

Dobby would never be able to tell them who had sent him to the cellar, but Harry knew what he had seen. A piercing blue eye had looked out of the mirror fragment, and then help had come. *Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it.*

Harry dried his hands, impervious to the beauty of the scene outside the window and to the murmuring of the others in the sitting room. He looked out over the ocean and felt closer, this dawn, than ever before, closer to the heart of it all.

And still his scar prickled, and he knew that Voldemort was getting there too. Harry understood and yet did not understand. His instinct was telling him one thing, his brain quite another. The Dumbledore in Harry's head smiled, surveying Harry over the tips of his fingers,

pressed together as if in prayer.

You gave Ron the Deluminator. You understood him . . . You gave him a way back. . . .

And you understood Wormtail too . . . You knew there was a bit of regret there, somewhere. . . .

And if you knew them . . . What did you know about me, Dumbledore?

Am I meant to know, but not to seek? Did you know how hard I'd find that? Is that why you made it this difficult? So I'd have time to work that out?

Harry stood quite still, eyes glazed, watching the place where a bright gold rim of dazzling sun was rising over the horizon. Then he looked down at his clean hands and was momentarily surprised to see the cloth he was holding in them. He set it down and returned to the hall, and as he did so, he felt his scar pulse angrily, and there flashed across his mind, swift as the reflection of a dragonfly over water, the outline of a building he knew extremely well.

Bill and Fleur were standing at the foot of the stairs.

"I need to speak to Griphook and Ollivander," Harry said.

"No," said Fleur. "You will 'ave to wait, 'Arry. Zey are both ill, tired —"

"I'm sorry," he said without heat, "but it can't wait. I need to talk to them now. Privately — and separately. It's urgent."

"Harry, what the hell's going on?" asked Bill. "You turn up here with a dead house-elf and a half-conscious goblin, Hermione looks as though she's been tortured, and Ron's just refused to tell me anything —"

"We can't tell you what we're doing," said Harry flatly. "You're in the Order, Bill, you know Dumbledore left us a mission. We're not supposed to talk about it to anyone else."

Fleur made an impatient noise, but Bill did not look at her; he was staring at Harry. His deeply scarred face was hard to read. Finally Bill said, "All right. Who do you want to talk to first?"

Harry hesitated. He knew what hung on his decision. There was hardly any time left; now was the moment to decide: Horcruxes or Hallows?

"Griphook," Harry said. "I'll speak to Griphook first."

His heart was racing as if he had been sprinting and had just cleared an enormous obstacle.

"Up here, then," said Bill, leading the way.

Harry had walked up several steps before stopping and looking back.

"I need you two as well!" he called to Ron and Hermione, who had been skulking, half concealed, in the doorway of the sitting room.

They both moved into the light, looking oddly relieved.

"How are you?" Harry asked Hermione. "You were amazing — coming up with that story when she was hurting you like that —"

Hermione gave a weak smile as Ron gave her a one-armed squeeze.

"What are we doing now, Harry?" he asked.

"You'll see. Come on."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed Bill up the steep stairs onto a small landing. Three doors led off it.

“In here,” said Bill, opening the door into his and Fleur’s room. It too had a view of the sea, now flecked with gold in the sunrise. Harry moved to the window, turned his back on the spectacular view, and waited, his arms folded, his scar prickling. Hermione took the chair beside the dressing table; Ron sat on the arm.

Bill reappeared, carrying the little goblin, whom he set down carefully upon the bed. Griphook grunted thanks, and Bill left, closing the door upon them all.

“I’m sorry to take you out of bed,” said Harry. “How are your legs?”

“Painful,” replied the goblin. “But mending.”

He was still clutching the sword of Gryffindor, and wore a strange look: half truculent, half intrigued. Harry noted the goblin’s sallow skin, his long thin fingers, his black eyes. Fleur had removed his shoes: His long feet were dirty. He was larger than a house-elf, but not by much. His domed head was much bigger than a human’s.

“You probably don’t remember —” Harry began.

“— that I was the goblin who showed you to your vault, the first time you ever visited Gringotts?” said Griphook. “I remember, Harry Potter. Even amongst goblins, you are very famous.”

Harry and the goblin looked at each other, sizing each other up. Harry’s scar was still prickling. He wanted to get through this interview with Griphook quickly, and at the same time was afraid of making a false move. While he tried to decide on the best way to approach his request, the goblin broke the silence.

“You buried the elf,” he said, sounding unexpectedly rancorous. “I watched you from the window of the bedroom next door.”

"Yes," said Harry.

Griphook looked at him out of the corners of his slanting black eyes.

"You are an unusual wizard, Harry Potter."

"In what way?" asked Harry, rubbing his scar absently.

"You dug the grave."

"So?"

Griphook did not answer. Harry rather thought he was being sneered at for acting like a Muggle, but it did not much matter to him whether Griphook approved of Dobby's grave or not. He gathered himself for the attack.

"Griphook, I need to ask —"

"You also rescued a goblin."

"What?"

"You brought me here. Saved me."

"Well, I take it you're not sorry?" said Harry a little impatiently.

"No, Harry Potter," said Griphook, and with one finger he twisted the thin black beard upon his chin, "but you are a very odd wizard."

"Right," said Harry. "Well, I need some help, Griphook, and you can give it to me."

The goblin made no sign of encouragement, but continued to frown at Harry as though he had never seen anything like him.

"I need to break into a Gringotts vault."

Harry had not meant to say it so baldly; the words were forced from him as pain shot through his lightning scar and he saw, again, the outline of Hogwarts. He closed his mind firmly. He needed to deal

with Griphook first. Ron and Hermione were staring at Harry as though he had gone mad.

"Harry —" said Hermione, but she was cut off by Griphook.

"Break into a Gringotts vault?" repeated the goblin, wincing a little as he shifted his position upon the bed. "It is impossible."

"No, it isn't," Ron contradicted him. "It's been done."

"Yeah," said Harry. "The same day I first met you, Griphook. My birthday, seven years ago."

"The vault in question was empty at the time," snapped the goblin, and Harry understood that even though Griphook had left Gringotts, he was offended at the idea of its defenses being breached. "Its protection was minimal."

"Well, the vault we need to get into isn't empty, and I'm guessing its protection will be pretty powerful," said Harry. "It belongs to the Lestranges."

He saw Hermione and Ron look at each other, astonished, but there would be time enough to explain after Griphook had given his answer.

"You have no chance," said Griphook flatly. "No chance at all. *If you seek beneath our floors, a treasure that was never yours* —"

"*Thief, you have been warned, beware* — yeah, I know, I remember," said Harry. "But I'm not trying to get myself any treasure, I'm not trying to take anything for personal gain. Can you believe that?"

The goblin looked slantwise at Harry, and the lightning scar on Harry's forehead prickled, but he ignored it, refusing to acknowledge its pain or its invitation.

"If there was a wizard of whom I would believe that they did not seek personal gain," said Griphook finally, "it would be you, Harry Potter. Goblins and elves are not used to the protection or the respect that you have shown this night. Not from wand-carriers."

"Wand-carriers," repeated Harry: The phrase fell oddly upon his ears as his scar prickled, as Voldemort turned his thoughts northward, and as Harry burned to question Ollivander next door.

"The right to carry a wand," said the goblin quietly, "has long been contested between wizards and goblins."

"Well, goblins can do magic without wands," said Ron.

"That is immaterial! Wizards refuse to share the secrets of wandlore with other magical beings, they deny us the possibility of extending our powers!"

"Well, goblins won't share any of their magic either," said Ron. "You won't tell us how to make swords and armor the way you do. Goblins know how to work metal in a way wizards have never —"

"It doesn't matter," said Harry, noting Griphook's rising color. "This isn't about wizards versus goblins or any other sort of magical creature —"

Griphook gave a nasty laugh.

"But it is, it is about precisely that! As the Dark Lord becomes ever more powerful, your race is set still more firmly above mine! Gringotts falls under Wizarding rule, house-elves are slaughtered, and who amongst the wand-carriers protests?"

"We do!" said Hermione. She had sat up straight, her eyes bright. "We protest! And I'm hunted quite as much as any goblin or elf, Griphook! I'm a Mudblood!"

"Don't call yourself —" Ron muttered.

"Why shouldn't I?" said Hermione. "Mudblood, and proud of it! I've got no higher position under this new order than you have, Griphook! It was me they chose to torture, back at the Malfoys'!"

As she spoke, she pulled aside the neck of the dressing gown to reveal the thin cut Bellatrix had made, scarlet against her throat.

"Did you know that it was Harry who set Dobby free?" she asked. "Did you know that we've wanted elves to be freed for years?" (Ron fidgeted uncomfortably on the arm of Hermione's chair.) "You can't want You-Know-Who defeated more than we do, Griphook!"

The goblin gazed at Hermione with the same curiosity he had shown Harry.

"What do you seek within the Lestranges' vault?" he asked abruptly. "The sword that lies inside it is a fake. This is the real one." He looked from one to the other of them. "I think that you already know this. You asked me to lie for you back there."

"But the fake sword isn't the only thing in that vault, is it?" asked Harry. "Perhaps you've seen the other things in there?"

His heart was pounding harder than ever. He redoubled his efforts to ignore the pulsing of his scar.

The goblin twisted his beard around his finger again.

"It is against our code to speak of the secrets of Gringotts. We are the guardians of fabulous treasures. We have a duty to the objects placed in our care, which were, so often, wrought by our fingers."

The goblin stroked the sword, and his black eyes roved from Harry to Hermione to Ron and then back again.

"So young," he said finally, "to be fighting so many."

"Will you help us?" said Harry. "We haven't got a hope of breaking in without a goblin's help. You're our one chance."

"I shall . . . think about it," said Griphook maddeningly.

"But —" Ron started angrily; Hermione nudged him in the ribs.

"Thank you," said Harry.

The goblin bowed his great domed head in acknowledgement, then flexed his short legs.

"I think," he said, settling himself ostentatiously upon Bill and Fleur's bed, "that the Skele-Gro has finished its work. I may be able to sleep at last. Forgive me. . . ."

"Yeah, of course," said Harry, but before leaving the room he leaned forward and took the sword of Gryffindor from beside the goblin. Griphook did not protest, but Harry thought he saw resentment in the goblin's eyes as he closed the door upon him.

"Little git," whispered Ron. "He's enjoying keeping us hanging."

"Harry," whispered Hermione, pulling them both away from the door, into the middle of the still-dark landing, "are you saying what I think you're saying? Are you saying there's a Horcrux in the Lestranges' vault?"

"Yes," said Harry. "Bellatrix was terrified when she thought we'd been in there, she was beside herself. Why? What did she think we'd seen, what else did she think we might have taken? Something she was petrified You-Know-Who would find out about."

"But I thought we were looking for places You-Know-Who's been, places he's done something important?" said Ron, looking baffled. "Was he ever inside the Lestranges' vault?"

"I don't know whether he was ever inside Gringotts," said Harry.

"He never had gold there when he was younger, because nobody left him anything. He would have seen the bank from the outside, though, the first time he ever went to Diagon Alley."

Harry's scar throbbed, but he ignored it; he wanted Ron and Hermione to understand about Gringotts before they spoke to Ollivander.

"I think he would have envied anyone who had a key to a Gringotts vault. I think he'd have seen it as a real symbol of belonging to the Wizarding world. And don't forget, he trusted Bellatrix and her husband. They were his most devoted servants before he fell, and they went looking for him after he vanished. He said it the night he came back, I heard him."

Harry rubbed his scar.

"I don't think he'd have told Bellatrix it was a Horcrux, though. He never told Lucius Malfoy the truth about the diary. He probably told her it was a treasured possession and asked her to place it in her vault. The safest place in the world for anything you want to hide, Hagrid told me . . . except for Hogwarts."

When Harry had finished speaking, Ron shook his head.

"You really understand him."

"Bits of him," said Harry. "Bits . . . I just wish I'd understood Dumbledore as much. But we'll see. Come on — Ollivander now."

Ron and Hermione looked bewildered but impressed as they followed him across the little landing and knocked upon the door opposite Bill and Fleur's. A weak "Come in!" answered them.

The wandmaker was lying on the twin bed farthest from the window. He had been held in the cellar for more than a year, and

tortured, Harry knew, on at least one occasion. He was emaciated, the bones of his face sticking out sharply against the yellowish skin. His great silver eyes seemed vast in their sunken sockets. The hands that lay upon the blanket could have belonged to a skeleton. Harry sat down on the empty bed, beside Ron and Hermione. The rising sun was not visible here. The room faced the cliff-top garden and the freshly dug grave.

"Mr. Ollivander, I'm sorry to disturb you," Harry said.

"My dear boy." Ollivander's voice was feeble. "You rescued us. I thought we would die in that place. I can never thank you . . . *never* thank you . . . enough."

"We were glad to do it."

Harry's scar throbbed. He knew, he was certain, that there was hardly any time left in which to beat Voldemort to his goal, or else to attempt to thwart him. He felt a flutter of panic . . . yet he had made his decision when he chose to speak to Griphook first. Feigning a calm he did not feel, he groped in the pouch around his neck and took out the two halves of his broken wand.

"Mr. Ollivander, I need some help."

"Anything. Anything," said the wandmaker weakly.

"Can you mend this? Is it possible?"

Ollivander held out a trembling hand, and Harry placed the two barely connected halves into his palm.

"Holly and phoenix feather," said Ollivander in a tremulous voice. "Eleven inches. Nice and supple."

"Yes," said Harry. "Can you — ?"

"No," whispered Ollivander. "I am sorry, very sorry, but a wand

that has suffered this degree of damage cannot be repaired by any means that I know of."

Harry had been braced to hear it, but it was a blow nevertheless. He took the wand halves back and replaced them in the pouch around his neck. Ollivander stared at the place where the shattered wand had vanished, and did not look away until Harry had taken from his pocket the two wands he had brought from the Malfoys'.

"Can you identify these?" Harry asked.

The wandmaker took the first of the wands and held it close to his faded eyes, rolling it between his knobble-knuckled fingers, flexing it slightly.

"Walnut and dragon heartstring," he said. "Twelve-and-three-quarter inches. Unyielding. This wand belonged to Bellatrix Lestrange."

"And this one?"

Ollivander performed the same examination.

"Hawthorn and unicorn hair. Ten inches precisely. Reasonably springy. This was the wand of Draco Malfoy."

"Was?" repeated Harry. "Isn't it still his?"

"Perhaps not. If you took it —"

"— I did —"

"— then it may be yours. Of course, the manner of taking matters. Much also depends upon the wand itself. In general, however, where a wand has been won, its allegiance will change."

There was silence in the room, except for the distant rushing of the sea.

"You talk about wands like they've got feelings," said Harry, "like

they can think for themselves."

"The wand chooses the wizard," said Ollivander. "That much has always been clear to those of us who have studied wandlore."

"A person can still use a wand that hasn't chosen them, though?" asked Harry.

"Oh yes, if you are any wizard at all you will be able to channel your magic through almost any instrument. The best results, however, must always come where there is the strongest affinity between wizard and wand. These connections are complex. An initial attraction, and then a mutual quest for experience, the wand learning from the wizard, the wizard from the wand."

The sea gushed forward and backward; it was a mournful sound.

"I took this wand from Draco Malfoy by force," said Harry. "Can I use it safely?"

"I think so. Subtle laws govern wand ownership, but the conquered wand will usually bend its will to its new master."

"So I should use this one?" said Ron, pulling Wormtail's wand out of his pocket and handing it to Ollivander.

"Chestnut and dragon heartstring. Nine-and-a-quarter inches. Brittle. I was forced to make this shortly after my kidnapping, for Peter Pettigrew. Yes, if you won it, it is more likely to do your bidding, and do it well, than another wand."

"And this holds true for all wands, does it?" asked Harry.

"I think so," replied Ollivander, his protuberant eyes upon Harry's face. "You ask deep questions, Mr. Potter. Wandlore is a complex and mysterious branch of magic."

"So, it isn't necessary to kill the previous owner to take true

possession of a wand?" asked Harry.

Ollivander swallowed.

"Necessary? No, I should not say that it is necessary to kill."

"There are legends, though," said Harry, and as his heart rate quickened, the pain in his scar became more intense; he was sure that Voldemort had decided to put his idea into action. "Legends about a wand — or wands — that have passed from hand to hand by murder."

Ollivander turned pale. Against the snowy pillow he was light gray, and his eyes were enormous, bloodshot, and bulging with what looked like fear.

"Only one wand, I think," he whispered.

"And You-Know-Who is interested in it, isn't he?" asked Harry.

"I — how?" croaked Ollivander, and he looked appealingly at Ron and Hermione for help. "How do you know this?"

"He wanted you to tell him how to overcome the connection between our wands," said Harry.

Ollivander looked terrified.

"He tortured me, you must understand that! The Cruciatus Curse, I — I had no choice but to tell him what I knew, what I guessed!"

"I understand," said Harry. "You told him about the twin cores? You said he just had to borrow another wizard's wand?"

Ollivander looked horrified, transfixed, by the amount that Harry knew. He nodded slowly.

"But it didn't work," Harry went on. "Mine still beat the borrowed wand. Do you know why that is?"

Ollivander shook his head as slowly as he had just nodded.

"I had . . . never heard of such a thing. Your wand performed something unique that night. The connection of the twin cores is incredibly rare, yet why your wand should have snapped the borrowed wand, I do not know. . . ."

"We were talking about the other wand, the wand that changes hands by murder. When You-Know-Who realized my wand had done something strange, he came back and asked about that other wand, didn't he?"

"How do you know this?"

Harry did not answer.

"Yes, he asked," whispered Ollivander. "He wanted to know everything I could tell him about the wand variously known as the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny, or the Elder Wand."

Harry glanced sideways at Hermione. She looked flabbergasted.

"The Dark Lord," said Ollivander in hushed and frightened tones, "had always been happy with the wand I made him — yew and phoenix feather, thirteen-and-a-half inches — until he discovered the connection of the twin cores. Now he seeks another, more powerful wand, as the only way to conquer yours."

"But he'll know soon, if he doesn't already, that mine's broken beyond repair," said Harry quietly.

"No!" said Hermione, sounding frightened. "He can't know that, Harry, how could he — ?"

"Priori Incantatem," said Harry. "We left your wand and the blackthorn wand at the Malfoys', Hermione. If they examine them properly, make them re-create the spells they've cast lately, they'll

see that yours broke mine, they'll see that you tried and failed to mend it, and they'll realize that I've been using the blackthorn one ever since."

The little color she had regained since their arrival had drained from her face. Ron gave Harry a reproachful look, and said, "Let's not worry about that now —"

But Mr. Ollivander intervened.

"The Dark Lord no longer seeks the Elder Wand only for your destruction, Mr. Potter. He is determined to possess it because he believes it will make him truly invulnerable."

"And will it?"

"The owner of the Elder Wand must always fear attack," said Ollivander, "but the idea of the Dark Lord in possession of the Deathstick is, I must admit . . . formidable."

Harry was suddenly reminded of how he had been unsure, when they first met, of how much he liked Ollivander. Even now, having been tortured and imprisoned by Voldemort, the idea of the Dark wizard in possession of this wand seemed to enthrall him as much as it repulsed him.

"You — you really think this wand exists, then, Mr. Ollivander?" asked Hermione.

"Oh yes," said Ollivander. "Yes, it is perfectly possible to trace the wand's course through history. There are gaps, of course, and long ones, where it vanishes from view, temporarily lost or hidden; but always it resurfaces. It has certain identifying characteristics that those who are learned in wandlore recognize. There are written accounts, some of them obscure, that I and other wandmakers have

made it our business to study. They have the ring of authenticity."

"So you — you don't think it can be a fairy tale or a myth?" Hermione asked hopefully.

"No," said Ollivander. "Whether it *needs* to pass by murder, I do not know. Its history is bloody, but that may be simply due to the fact that it is such a desirable object, and arouses such passions in wizards. Immensely powerful, dangerous in the wrong hands, and an object of incredible fascination to all of us who study the power of wands."

"Mr. Ollivander," said Harry, "you told You-Know-Who that Gregorovitch had the Elder Wand, didn't you?"

Ollivander turned, if possible, even paler. He looked ghostly as he gulped.

"But how — how do you — ?"

"Never mind how I know it," said Harry, closing his eyes momentarily as his scar burned and he saw, for mere seconds, a vision of the main street in Hogsmeade, still dark, because it was so much farther north. "You told You-Know-Who that Gregorovitch had the wand?"

"It was a rumor," whispered Ollivander. "A rumor, years and years ago, long before you were born! I believe Gregorovitch himself started it. You can see how good it would be for business: that he was studying and duplicating the qualities of the Elder Wand!"

"Yes, I can see that," said Harry. He stood up. "Mr. Ollivander, one last thing, and then we'll let you get some rest. What do you know about the Deathly Hallows?"

"The — the what?" asked the wandmaker, looking utterly

bewildered.

“The Deathly Hallows.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about. Is this still something to do with wands?”

Harry looked into the sunken face and believed that Ollivander was not acting. He did not know about the Hallows.

“Thank you,” said Harry. “Thank you very much. We’ll leave you to get some rest now.”

Ollivander looked stricken.

“He was torturing me!” he gasped. “The Cruciatus Curse . . . you have no idea. . . .”

“I do,” said Harry. “I really do. Please get some rest. Thank you for telling me all of this.”

He led Ron and Hermione down the staircase. Harry caught a glimpse of Bill, Fleur, Luna, and Dean sitting at the table in the kitchen, cups of tea in front of them. They all looked up at Harry as he appeared in the doorway, but he merely nodded to them and continued into the garden, Ron and Hermione behind him. The reddish mound of earth that covered Dobby lay ahead, and Harry walked back to it, as the pain in his head built more and more powerfully. It was a huge effort now to close down the visions that were forcing themselves upon him, but he knew that he would have to resist only a little longer. He would yield very soon, because he needed to know that his theory was right. He must make only one more short effort, so that he could explain to Ron and Hermione.

“Gregorovitch had the Elder Wand a long time ago,” he said. “I saw You-Know-Who trying to find him. When he tracked him down,

he found that Gregorovitch didn't have it anymore: It was stolen from him by Grindelwald. How Grindelwald found out that Gregorovitch had it, I don't know — but if Gregorovitch was stupid enough to spread the rumor, it can't have been that difficult."

Voldemort was at the gates of Hogwarts; Harry could see him standing there, and see too the lamp bobbing in the pre-dawn, coming closer and closer.

"And Grindelwald used the Elder Wand to become powerful. And at the height of his power, when Dumbledore knew he was the only one who could stop him, he dueled Grindelwald and beat him, and he took the Elder Wand."

"*Dumbledore* had the Elder Wand?" said Ron. "But then — where is it now?"

"At Hogwarts," said Harry, fighting to remain with them in the cliff-top garden.

"But then, let's go!" said Ron urgently. "Harry, let's go and get it before he does!"

"It's too late for that," said Harry. He could not help himself, but clutched his head, trying to help it resist. "He knows where it is. He's there now."

"Harry!" Ron said furiously. "How long have you known this — why have we been wasting time? Why did you talk to Griphook first? We could have gone — we could still go —"

"No," said Harry, and he sank to his knees in the grass. "Hermione's right. Dumbledore didn't want me to have it. He didn't want me to take it. He wanted me to get the Horcruxes."

"The unbeatable wand, Harry!" moaned Ron.

“I’m not supposed to . . . I’m supposed to get the Horcruxes. . . .”

And now everything was cool and dark: The sun was barely visible over the horizon as he glided alongside Snape, up through the grounds toward the lake.

“I shall join you in the castle shortly,” he said in his high, cold voice. “Leave me now.”

Snape bowed and set off back up the path, his black cloak billowing behind him. Harry walked slowly, waiting for Snape’s figure to disappear. It would not do for Snape, or indeed anyone else, to see where he was going. But there were no lights in the castle windows, and he could conceal himself . . . and in a second he had cast upon himself a Disillusionment Charm that hid him even from his own eyes.

And he walked on, around the edge of the lake, taking in the outlines of the beloved castle, his first kingdom, his birthright. . . .

And here it was, beside the lake, reflected in the dark waters. The white marble tomb, an unnecessary blot on the familiar landscape. He felt again that rush of controlled euphoria, that heady sense of purpose in destruction. He raised the old yew wand: How fitting that this would be its last great act.

The tomb split open from head to foot. The shrouded figure was as long and thin as it had been in life. He raised the wand again.

The wrappings fell open. The face was translucent, pale, sunken, yet almost perfectly preserved. They had left his spectacles on the crooked nose: He felt amused derision. Dumbledore’s hands were folded upon his chest, and there it lay, clutched beneath them, buried with him.

Had the old fool imagined that marble or death would protect the wand? Had he thought that the Dark Lord would be scared to violate his tomb? The spiderlike hand swooped and pulled the wand from Dumbledore's grasp, and as he took it, a shower of sparks flew from its tip, sparkling over the corpse of its last owner, ready to serve a new master at last.

— HOOFSTUK VIER-EN-TWINTIG —

Die Towerstafmaker

Dit is soos om in 'n ou nagmerrie weg te sink; 'n oomblik lank kniel hy weer langs Dumbledore se liggaam aan die voet van Hogwarts se hoogste toring, maar in werklikheid staar hy na 'n klein lyfie wat op die gras opgekrul lê met Bellatrix se silwer mes in hom. Harry se stem sê nog steeds: "Dobby . . . *Dobby* . . ." selfs al weet hy die elf is weg na waarvandaan hy hom nie kan terugroep nie.

Ná 'n minuut of so besef hy hulle het op die ou end tog na die regte plek toe gekom, want Bill en Fleur, Dean en Luna kom staan om hom terwyl hy by die elf kniel.

"Hermione?" sê hy skielik. "Waar is sy?"

"Ron het haar ingevat," sê Bill. "Sy sal oukei wees."

Harry kyk weer af na Dobby. Hy strek 'n hand uit en trek die skerp lem uit die elf se lyf, trek dan sy eie baadjie uit en bedek Dobby daarmee asof dit 'n kombers is.

Die see slaan teen rotse iewers naby; Harry luister daarna terwyl die ander gesels, dinge bespreek waarin hy nie belangstel nie, en besluite neem. Dean dra die beseerde Griphook by die huis in en Fleur volg hulle haastig; Bill maak nou voorstelle oor hoe om die elf te begrawe. Harry stem in sonder om regtig te weet wat hy sê. Terwyl hy dit doen, staar hy af na die klein lyfie en sy litteken prik en brand, en in een deel van sy kop, asof hy dit beskou uit die verkeerde kant van 'n lang teleskoop, sien hy hoe straf Voldemort die mense wat hulle by die Malfoys se herehuis agtergelaat het. Sy woede is verskriklik, maar dit is of Harry se hartseer oor Dobby dit laat vervaag sodat dit 'n veraf storm word wat Harry van oorkant 'n wyd uitgestrekte, stil oseaan bereik.

"Ek wil dit ordentlik doen," is die eerste woorde wat Harry ten volle bewus uiter. "Nie met towerkrag nie. Het julle 'n graaf?"

En kort daarna spring hy aan die werk, alleen, en grawe die graf op die plek wat Bill vir hom gewys het aan die einde van die tuin, tussen struike. Hy grawe met 'n soort woede, skep behae in die handearbeid, verlustig hom daarin dat hy nie towerkrag gebruik

nie, want elke druppel van sy sweet en elke waterblaas voel soos 'n geskenk aan die elf wat hulle lewe gered het.

Sy litteken brand, maar hy is meester van die pyn; hy voel afgesluit daarvan. Hy het uiteindelik beheer geleer, geleer om sy gedagtes van Voldemort af te sluit, die einste ding wat Dumbledore wou gehad het hy by Snape moes leer. Net soos Voldemort nie in staat was om besit te neem van Harry terwyl Harry verteer was deur verdriet oor Sirius nie, so kan sy gedagtes Harry nie nou binnedring terwyl hy oor Dobby treur nie. Dit is asof hartseer Voldemort verdryf . . . hoewel Dumbledore natuurlik sou gesê het dit is liefde . . .

Harry grawe verder, dieper en dieper in die harde, koue aarde; hy onderdruk sy hartseer in sy sweet, ontken die pyn in sy litteken. In die donker, met niks anders as die geluid van sy eie asemhaling en die ruisende see om hom geselskap te hou nie, kom die dinge wat by die Malfoys gebeur het terug na hom, kom die dinge wat hy gehoor het terug na hom, en ontluik begrip in die duister . . .

Sy arms se egalige ritme slaan die maat met sy gedagtes. Skatte . . . Horcruxe . . . Skatte . . . Horcruxe . . . nogtans brand hy nie meer met daardie vreemde, obsessiewe verlange nie. Verlies en vrees het dit geblus: dit voel of hy weer wakker geruk is.

Harry sink dieper en dieper in die graf af en hy weet waar Voldemort vanaand was en wie hy in Nurmengard se boonste sel vermoor het en hoekom . . .

En hy dink aan Wurmstert, wat dood is as gevolg van een klein, onbewuste impuls van genade . . . Dumbledore het dit voorsien . . . Hoeveel meer het hy geweet?

Harry verloor tred met die tyd. Hy weet net die donkerte het 'n paar grade ligter geword toe Ron en Dean weer by hom aansluit.

"Hoe gaan dit met Hermione?"

"Beter," sê Ron. "Fleur pas haar op."

Harry het sy antwoord gereed vir wanneer hulle hom vra hoekom hy nie eenvoudig 'n perfekte graf met sy towerstaf geskep het nie, maar hy het dit nie nodig nie. Hulle spring met grawe van hulle eie in die gat, en werk in stilte saam totdat dit diep genoeg lyk.

Harry draai die elf knusser in sy baadjie toe. Ron sit op die rand van die graf, trek sy skoene en sokkies uit, en trek dit aan die elf se kaal voete. Dean kom vorendag met 'n wolhoed; Harry sit dit versigtig op Dobby se kop en dit bedek sy vlermuisore.

"Ons moet sy oë toemaak."

Harry het die ander nie deur die donker hoor aankom nie. Bill dra 'n reismantel en Fleur 'n groot wit voorskoot met 'n sak waarby daar 'n bottel uitsteek wat Harry herken as Skelet-Groei. Hermione

is in 'n geleende kamerjas toegewikkel, bleek en onvas op haar voete; Ron sit 'n arm om haar toe sy by hom kom. Luna, wat een van Fleur se jasse dra, buk af en sit haar vingers teer op elkeen van die elf se ooglede en druk hulle dan oor sy glaserige oë.

"So," sê sy sag. "Nou lyk dit of hy slaap."

Harry sit die elf in die graf neer en rangskik die klein ledemate sodat dit lyk of hy rus, dan klim hy uit en kyk vir die laaste keer na die klein lyfie. Hy dwing homself om nie in trane uit te bars nie toe hy terugdink aan Dumbledore se begrafnis, aan die rye en rye goue stoele, aan die Minister van Towerkuns in die voorste ry, die lang vermelding van al Dumbledore se prestasies, die statigheid van die wit marmergraf. Hy voel Dobby verdien net so 'n deftige begrafnis, maar tog, hier lê die elf tussen struike in 'n graf wat net rofweg gegrawe is.

"Ek dink ons moet iets sê," onderbreek Luna sy gedagtes. "Ek sal eerste praat, reg?"

En terwyl almal na haar kyk, spreek sy die dooie elf onderin die graf aan.

"Baie dankie dat jy my uit daardie kelder gered het, Dobby. Dis so onregverdig dat jy moes doodgaan, terwyl jy so goed en dapper was. Ek sal altyd onthou wat jy vir ons gedoen het. Ek hoop jy is nou gelukkig."

Sy draai om en kyk afwagtend na Ron, wat keel skoonmaak en in 'n skor stem sê: "Ja . . . dankie, Dobby."

"Dankie," sê Dean.

Harry sluk.

"Tot siens, Dobby," sê hy. Dit is al wat hy kan uitkry, maar Luna het reeds alles vir hom gesê. Bill lig sy towerstaf en die hoop grond langs die graf styg in die lug op, val netjies daarin en vorm 'n klein rooierige heuweltjie.

"Gee julle om as ek 'n oomblik hier bly?" vra Harry vir die ander.

Hulle prewel woorde wat hy nie hoor nie; hy voel hoe hy sag op sy rug geklop word en dan gaan almal terug na die kothuis en laat Harry alleen agter by die elf.

Hy kyk rond: daar is 'n paar groot wit klippe wat deur die see glad gemaal is om die blombeddings se rande gepak. Hy tel een van die grootstes op en lê dit soos 'n kussing neer op die plek waar Dobby se kop nou rus. Dan voel hy in sy sak vir 'n towerstaf.

Daar is twee. Hy het vergeet, tred verloor; hy kan nou nie onthou wie se towerstawwe hierdie was nie; hy onthou vaagweg hoe hy hulle uit iemand se hand geruk het. Hy kies die korter een van die twee wat vriendeliker in sy hand voel en wys daarmee na die klip.

Stadig, terwyl hy instruksies fluister, verskyn daar diep groewe op die klip. Hy weet Hermione sal dit netjieser kan doen, en heel moontlik vinniger, maar hy wil hierdie plek merk net soos wat hy die graf wou grawe. Toe Harry regop kom, staan daar op die klip:

Hier lê Dobby, 'n vry elf.

Hy kyk vir 'n paar sekondes lank af na sy handewerk, dan loop hy weg. Sy litteken prik nog steeds 'n bietjie en sy kop is vol van die dinge wat in die graf na hom toe gekom het, idees wat in die donker vorm aangeneem het, idees wat sowel fassinerend as vreesaanjaend is.

Hulle sit almal in die sitkamer toe hy by die klein voorportaal inkom, hulle aandag gefokus op Bill wat praat. Die vertrek is lig van kleur, mooi, met 'n klein vuurtjie van dryfhout wat vrolik in die kaggel knetter. Harry wil nie modder op die tapyt mors nie, dus staan hy in die deuropening en luister.

". . . maar gelukkig is Ginny met vakansie. As sy by Hogwarts was, sou hulle haar weggeneem het voor ons by haar kon kom. Nou weet ons sy's ook veilig."

Hy kyk om en sien Harry daar staan.

"Ek het hulle almal by Die Konynenes weggekry," verduidelik hy. "Hulle na Muriel toe gevat. Die Doodseters weet nou Ron is by jou, dus sal hulle die familie begin teiken – moenie sê jy's jammer nie," voeg hy by toe hy Harry se uitdrukking sien. "Dit was net 'n kwessie van tyd, Pa sê al maande lank so. Ons is die grootste familie bloedverraaiers."

"Hoe word hulle beskerm?" vra Harry.

"Fideliustowerspreuk. Pa is die Geheimhouer. En ons het dit op hierdie huisie ook van krag gemaak; ek's die Geheimhouer hier. Nie een van ons kan gaan werk nie, maar dis beslis nie nou die belangrikste ding nie. Sodra Ollivander en Griphook sterk genoeg is, gaan ons hulle ook na Muriel toe neem. Hier's nie baie plek nie, maar sy't baie. Griphook se bene is aan die gesond word; Fleur het vir hom Skelet-Groei gegee: ons kan hulle waarskynlik oor 'n uur of so al hier wegneem –"

"Nee," sê Harry en Bill lyk verras. "Ek het hulle al twee hier nodig. Ek moet met hulle praat. Dis belangrik."

Hy hoor die gesag in sy eie stem, die oortuiging, die doelgerigtheid wat na hom toe gekom het terwyl hy Dobby se graf gegrawe het. Almal se gesigte is na hom gedraai, hulle lyk verbaas.

"Ek gaan was," sê Harry vir Bill terwyl hy afkyk na sy hande wat

vol modder en met Dobby se bloed besmeer is. "Dan wil ek hulle sien, dadelik."

Hy loop by die kombuisie in en gaan na die wasbak onder 'n venster wat oor die see uitkyk. Die dag breek oor die horison, skulppienk en dofgoud, terwyl hy sy hande was en weer die gedagtegang volg wat in die donker tuin na hom toe gekom het . . .

Dobby sal nooit vir hulle kan sê wie hom na die kelder gestuur het nie, maar Harry weet wat hy gesien het. 'n Priemende blou oog het by die spieëlskerf uitgekyk en toe daag daar hulp op. *By Hogwarts sal daar altyd hulp verleen word aan diegene wat daarvoor vra.*

Harry droog sy hande af; die pragtige toneel buite en die ander se gemurmel in die sitkamer maak geen indruk op hom nie. Hy kyk uit oor die oseaan en voel met hierdie dagbreek nader as ooit tevore, nader aan die kern van alles.

En sy litteken prikkel nog steeds, en hy weet Voldemort kom ook daarby uit. Harry verstaan, en verstaan terselfdertyd ook nie. Sy instink sê vir hom een ding, sy brein iets heeltemal anders. Die Dumbledore in Harry se kop glimlag en hou Harry dop oor die punte van sy vingers wat saamgeslaan is asof hy bid.

Jy het vir Ron die Afskakelaar gegee. Jy het hom verstaan . . . Jy het hom gewys hoe om terug te kom . . .

En jy het Wurmstert ook verstaan . . . Jy het geweet daar is 'n tikkie berou daar iewers . . .

En as jy hulle geken het . . . Wat het jy van my geweet, Dumbledore?

Is ek veronderstel om te weet, maar nie te soek nie? Het jy geweet hoe swaar dit vir my sal wees? Is dit hoekom jy dit so moeilik gemaak het? Sodat ek tyd sal hê om dit uit te werk?

Harry staan doodstil en kyk met glasige oë na die plek waar die stralende son met 'n helder goue rand oor die horison opkom. Dan kyk hy af na sy skoon hande en is 'n oomblik lank verbaas om die lap te sien wat hy vashou. Hy sit dit neer en gaan terug na die voorportaal toe, en terwyl hy dit doen, voel hy sy litteken intens klop en dan flits iets deur sy kop, vlugtig soos 'n naaldekoker se weerkaatsing op water, die buitelyne van 'n gebou wat hy besonder goed ken.

Bill en Fleur staan aan die voet van die trap.

"Ek moet met Griphook en Ollivander praat," sê Harry.

"Nee," sê Fleur. "Jy sal moet wag, 'arry. 'ulle is albei siek, moeg –"

"Ek's jammer," sê hy kalm, "maar dit kan nie wag nie. Ek moet nou met hulle praat. Privaat – en apart. Dis dringend."

"Harry, wat de hel gaan aan?" vra Bill. "Jy daag hier op met 'n dooie huiself en 'n halfbewustelose kabouter, Hermione lyk asof sy gemartel is en Ron verseg om my enigiets te vertel –"

"Ons kan nie vir julle vertel wat ons doen nie," sê Harry uitdrukkingloos. "Jy is in die Orde, Bill, jy weet Dumbledore het vir ons 'n opdrag gegee. Ons is nie veronderstel om met enigiemand anders daaroor te praat nie."

Fleur maak 'n ongeduldige geluid, maar Bill kyk nie na haar nie; hy staar na Harry. Dit is moeilik om sy gesig met die diep littekens te lees. Uiteindelik sê Bill: "Nou goed. Met wie wil jy eerste praat?"

Harry aarsel. Hy besef die erns van sy besluit. Daar is beswaarlik tyd oor: dit is nou die oomblik om te besluit: Horcruxe of Skatte?

"Griphook," sê Harry. "Ek sal eerste met Griphook praat."

Sy hart klop vinnig, asof hy aan 'n naelloop deelneem en so pas 'n enorme hindernis oorgesteek het.

"Kom saam op boontoe," sê Bill en stap vooruit.

Harry loop 'n hele paar trappe op voor hy gaan staan en terugkyk.

"Ek het julle twee ook nodig!" roep hy Ron en Hermione, wat half weggesteek in die sitkamer se deur staan.

Hulle beweeg tot in die lig en lyk vreemd verlig.

"Hoe voel jy?" vra Harry vir Hermione. "Jy was ongelooflik – om met daai storie uit te kom terwyl sy jou so seergemaak het –"

Hermione glimlag flou terwyl Ron haar met een arm 'n drukkie gee.

"Wat gaan ons nou doen, Harry?" vra hy.

"Julle sal sien. Komaan."

Harry, Ron en Hermione volg Bill met die steil trap op tot by 'n klein trapportaal. Drie deure lei daaruit.

"Hier in," sê Bill en maak die deur na sy en Fleur se kamer oop. Dit het ook 'n uitsig oor die see wat nou in die sonsopkoms met goud gevlek is. Harry beweeg na die venster, draai sy rug op die skouspelagtige uitsig en wag met gevoude arms en 'n prikkende litteken. Hermione gaan sit in die stoel langs die spieëltafel en Ron neem op die armleuning plaas.

Bill verskyn weer; hy dra die kaboutertjie en sit hom versigtig op die bed neer. Griphook brom 'n dankie, en Bill gaan uit en maak die deur toe.

"Ek is jammer om jou uit die bed te jaag," sê Harry. "Hoe voel jou bene?"

"Seer," antwoord die kabouter. "Maar hulle kom reg."

Hy klou nog steeds aan Gryffindor se swaard vas en daar is 'n snaakse uitdrukking op sy gesig: half uitdagend, half nuuskierig. Harry sien die kabouter se blas velkleur, sy lang, dun vingers, sy

swart oë. Fleur het sy skoene uitgetrek: sy lang voete is vuil. Hy is groter as 'n huiself, maar nie baie nie. Sy koepelvormige kop is baie groter as 'n mens s'n.

"Jy onthou seker nie –" begin Harry.

"– dat ek die kabouter is wat jou na jou kluis toe geneem het met jou eerste besoek aan Gringotts nie?" sê Griphook. "Ek onthou, Harry Potter. Jy is selfs onder kabouters baie beroemd."

Harry en die kabouter kyk na mekaar, meet mekaar. Harry se litteken prikkel nog steeds. Hy wil vinnig deur hierdie gesprek met Griphook kom, maar is terselfdertyd bang hy neem 'n verkeerde stap. Terwyl hy probeer besluit wat die beste manier sal wees om sy versoek te benader, verbreek die kabouter die stilte.

"Jy het die elf begrawe," sê hy en klink onverwags wrewelig. "Ek het jou dopgehou uit die kamer langsaan se venster."

"Ja," sê Harry.

Griphook kyk na hom uit die hoeke van sy skuins swart oë.

"Jy is 'n buitengewone towenaar, Harry Potter."

"In watter opsig?" vra Harry en vryf sy litteken ingedagte.

"Jy het die graf gegrawe."

"So?"

Griphook antwoord nie. Harry dink die kabouter trek sy neus op vir hom wat soos 'n Moggel optree, maar hy gee nie baie om of Griphook Dobby se graf goedkeur of nie. Hy maak hom gereed vir aanval.

"Griphook, ek moet jou vra –"

"Jy't ook 'n kabouter gered."

"Wat?"

"Jy't my hierheen gebring. My gered."

"Wel, ek hoop nie jy's spyt daaroor nie?" sê Harry effens ongeduldig.

"Nee, Harry Potter," sê Griphook en draai die dun swart baardjie op sy ken om sy vinger, "maar jy is 'n baie eienaardige towenaar."

"Reg," sê Harry. "Wel, ek het hulp nodig, Griphook, en jy kan dit vir my gee."

Die kabouter lyk nie juis hulpvaardig nie; hy kyk Harry steeds fronsend aan asof hy nog nooit iets soos hy gesien het nie.

"Ek moet by een van Gringotts se kluise inbreek."

Harry het nie bedoel om dit so reguit te sê nie; die woorde word uit hom gepers toe pyn deur die weerliglitteken skiet en hy weer eens Hogwarts se buitelyne sien. Hy sluit sy gedagtes ferm af. Hy moet nou eers op Griphook konsentreer. Ron en Hermione staar na Harry asof hy mal geword het.

"Harry –" sê Hermione, maar Griphook onderbreek haar.

"By een van Gringotts se kluise inbreek?" herhaal die kabouter en krimp effens ineen van pyn toe hy van posisie verander op die bed. "Dis onmoontlik."

"Nee, dit is nie," weerspreek Ron hom. "Dit is al gedoen."

"Ja," sê Harry. "Dieselfde dag toe ek jou die eerste keer ontmoet het, Griphook. My verjaardag, sewe jaar gelede."

"Die betrokke kluis was destyds leeg," kap die kabouter terug, en Harry verstaan; selfs al is Griphook weg by Gringotts, krenk die gedagte dat die bank se sekuriteit geskend is hom. "Dit was minimaal beskerm."

"Wel, die kluis waarby ons moet inkom, is nie leeg nie, en ek dink dit word baie goed beskerm," sê Harry. "Dit behoort aan die Lestranges."

Hy sien hoe Hermione en Ron verbaas na mekaar kyk, maar daar sal genoeg tyd wees om te verduidelik nadat Griphook hom geantwoord het.

"Jy het nie 'n kans nie," sê Griphook uitdrukkingloos. "Nie 'n kat se kans nie. *'As jy skatte wil kom haal, Skatte wat nie joune is nie –'* "

"*'Dief, onthou hierdie waarskuwing –'* ja, ek weet, ek onthou," sê Harry. "Maar ek wil nie vir myself 'n skat probeer kry nie, ek wil nie iets vir persoonlike gewin probeer vat nie. Glo jy my?"

Die kabouter kyk skeef na Harry en die weerliglitteken op Harry se voorkop prik, maar hy ignoreer dit en weier om toe te gee aan die pyn of die uitnodiging.

"As daar 'n towenaar is van wie ek sal glo dat hy nie persoonlike gewin soek nie," sê Griphook uiteindelik, "sal dit jy wees, Harry Potter. Kabouters en elwe is nie gewoond aan die beskerming wat jy vanaand verleen het nie, en ook nie aan die respek wat jy betoon het nie. Nie van towerstafdraers nie."

"Towerstafdraers," herhaal Harry. Die woord val vreemd op sy ore terwyl sy litteken prik, terwyl Voldemort sy gedagtes noordwaarts wend, en terwyl Harry brand om Ollivander in die kamer langsaan te ondervra.

"Die reg om 'n towerstaf te dra," sê die kabouter sag, "is al jare lank 'n twispunt tussen towenaars en kabouters."

"Wel, kabouters kan sonder towerstawwe toor," sê Ron.

"Dis nie ter sake nie! Towenaars weier om die geheime van towerstafkunde met ander towerwesens te deel. Hulle ontsê ons die moontlikheid om ons magte uit te brei!"

"Wel, kabouters wil ook nie enige van hulle towerkrag met ons deel nie," sê Ron. "Julle wil nie vir ons sê hoe om swaarde en

wapenrusting op julle manier te maak nie. Kabouters weet hoe om met metaal te werk op 'n manier wat towenaars nog nooit –"

"Dit maak nie saak nie," sê Harry, wat sien hoe Griphook rooi in die gesig word. "Dit gaan hier nie oor towenaars teen kabouters of enige ander soort towerkreatuur nie –"

Griphook lag geniepsig.

"Maar dit is presies waaroor dit gaan! As die Donker Heer selfs nog magtiger word, sal julle ras net nog meer bo myne verhef word! Gringotts val onder towenaarsheerskappy, huiselwe word afgemaai, en wie van die towerstafdraers protesteer?"

"Ons!" sê Hermione. Sy sit nou regop en haar oë blink. "Ons protesteer! En daar word net soveel op my jag gemaak as op enige kabouter of elf, Griphook! Ek's 'n Modderbloed!"

"Jy noem jouself nie –" mompel Ron.

"Hoekom sal ek nie?" sê Hermione. "Ek's 'n Modderbloed en trots daarop! Ek het nie 'n hoër posisie as jy in hierdie nuwe bestel nie, Griphook! Hulle het my gekies om te martel, daar by die Malfoys!"

Terwyl sy praat, trek sy die kamerjas se kraag weg en hulle sien Bellatrix se dun snit aan haar nek, helderrooi teen haar keel.

"Het jy geweet dit was Harry wat Dobby vrygelaat het?" vra sy. "Het jy geweet ons wil al jare lank hê elwe moet vry wees?" (Ron kriewel ongemaklik op Hermione se stoel se armleuning.) "Jy kan nie meer as ons wil hê Jy-Weet-Wie moet verslaan word nie, Griphook!"

Die kabouter staar na Hermione met dieselfde nuuskierigheid as vroeër na Harry.

"Wat soek jy in die Lestranges se kluis?" vra hy kortaf. "Die swaard wat daarin is, is 'n namaaksel. Dis die regte een hierdie." Hy kyk om die beurt na hulle. "Ek dink jy weet dit reeds. Jy het my gevra om daar anderkant vir jou te lieg."

"Maar die vals swaard is nie die enigste ding in daardie kluis nie, is dit?" vra Harry. "Miskien het jy die ander goed daarin gesien?"

Sy hart klop nou vinniger as ooit. Hy verdubbel sy poging om sy polsende litteken te ignoreer.

Die kabouter draai sy baard weer om sy vinger.

"Dit is teen ons kode om Gringotts se geheime te verklap. Ons bewaar fantastiese skatte. Ons het 'n verpligting teenoor die artikels wat in ons sorg geplaas word, artikels wat so dikwels deur ons eie hande gesmee is."

Die kabouter streel die swaard en sy swart oë dwaal van Harry na Hermione, na Ron en dan weer terug.

"So jonk," sê hy uiteindelik, "om teen so baie te veg."
"Sal jy ons help?" vra Harry. "Ons kan onmoontlik sonder 'n kabouter se hulp daar inkom. Jy's ons enigste kans."
"Ek sal . . . daaroor dink," sê Griphook sieltergend.
"Maar –" begin Ron kwaad; Hermione pomp hom in die ribbes.
"Dankie," sê Harry.
Die kabouter buig sy groot, koepelvormige kop in erkenning en strek dan sy kort bene uit.
"Ek dink," sê hy terwyl hy hom windmakerig op Bill en Fleur se bed tuismaak, "die Skelet-Groei het sy werk gedoen. Ek sal dalk nou uiteindelik kan slaap. Verskoon my . . ."
"Ja, natuurlik," sê Harry, maar voor hy die kamer verlaat, leun hy vorentoe en tel Gryffindor se swaard wat langs die kabouter lê op. Griphook maak nie beswaar nie, maar Harry verbeel hom hy sien wrewel in die kabouter se oë toe hy die deur agter hom toemaak.
"Klein wetter," fluister Ron. "Hy geniet dit om ons aan 'n lyntjie te hou."
"Harry," fluister Hermione en trek hulle albei weg van die deur af na die middel van die trapportaal wat nog donker is, "sê jy wat ek dink jy sê? Sê jy daar's 'n Horcrux in die Lestranges se kluis?"
"Ja," sê Harry. "Bellatrix was paniekerig toe sy vermoed ons was daar, sy was rasend. Hoekom? Wat het sy gedink het ons gesien, wat anders het sy gedink het ons gevat? Iets wat sy doodbang was Jy-Weet-Wie sal van uitvind."
"Maar ek dog ons soek na plekke waar Jy-Weet-Wie was, plekke waar hy iets belangriks gedoen het?" sê Ron, wat uit die veld geslaan lyk. "Was hy ooit in die Lestranges se kluis?"
"Ek weet nie of hy al ooit in Gringotts was nie," sê Harry. "Hy het nooit goud daar gehad toe hy jonger was nie, want niemand het vir hom enigiets nagelaat nie. Maar hy sou die bank van buitekant af gesien het toe hy die heel eerste keer na Diagonaalstraat toe is."
Harry se litteken klop, maar hy ignoreer dit; hy wil hê Ron en Hermione moet van Gringotts verstaan voor hulle met Ollivander praat.
"Ek dink hy sou jaloers gewees het op enigiemand wat 'n sleutel vir 'n kluis in Gringotts het. Ek dink hy sou dit beskou het as 'n simbool van iemand wat regtig in die towerwêreld tuishoort. En moenie vergeet nie, hy het Bellatrix en haar man vertrou. Hulle was sy mees toegewyde volgelinge voor sy val, en hulle het na hom gaan soek ná hy verdwyn het. Hy't die nag toe hy teruggekom het so gesê, ek het hom gehoor."
Harry vryf sy litteken.

"Maar ek dink nie hy sou vir Bellatrix gesê het dis 'n Horcrux nie. Hy het nooit vir Lucius Malfoy die waarheid oor die dagboek vertel nie. Hy het waarskynlik vir haar gesê dis 'n kosbare besitting en haar gevra om dit in haar kluis te bewaar. Hagrid het vir my gesê dis die veiligste plek in die wêreld as 'n mens enigiets wil wegsteek . . . behalwe Hogwarts."

Toe Harry klaar gepraat het, skud Ron sy kop.

"Jy verstaan hom werklik."

"Bietjies van hom," sê Harry. "Bietjies . . . Ek wens net ek het soveel van Dumbledore verstaan. Maar ons sal sien. Komaan – nou's dit Ollivander."

Ron en Hermione lyk verwilderd maar beïndruk terwyl hulle hom deur die klein trapportaal volg. Harry se klop aan die deur oorkant Bill en Fleur s'n word met 'n flou "Kom in!" beantwoord.

Die towerstafmaker lê op die enkelbed die verste van die venster af. Hy is langer as 'n jaar in die kelder aangehou en ten minste eenkeer gemartel waarvan Harry weet. Hy is uitgeteer; die bene in sy gesig steek skerp uit teen die gelerige vel. Sy groot silwer oë lyk reusagtig in hulle ingevalle kasse. Die hande wat op die kombers lê, kan 'n geraamte s'n wees. Harry gaan sit op die leë bed langs Ron en Hermione. Die opkomende son is nie hier sigbaar nie. Die kamer kyk uit op die tuin bo-op die krans en die vars graf.

"Meneer Ollivander, ek is jammer om u te pla," sê Harry.

"My liewe seun," Ollivander se stem is swak. "Julle het ons gered. Ek het gedink ons gaan sterf in daardie plek. Hoe kan ek julle ooit genoeg . . . *ooit* genoeg . . . bedank?"

"Ons is bly ons kon dit doen."

Harry se litteken klop. Hy weet, hy is seker, daar is beswaarlik tyd oor om voor Voldemort by sy doelwit uit te kom, of anders om hom te probeer dwarsboom. Hy voel 'n siddering van paniek . . . maar hy het sy besluit geneem toe hy gekies het om eerste met Griphook te praat. Al is hy allesbehalwe kalm, gee hy voor hy is, lig die sakkie om sy nek af en haal die twee helftes van sy gebreekte towerstaf uit.

"Meneer Ollivander, ek het hulp nodig."

"Enigiets. Enigiets," sê die towerstafmaker floutjies.

"Kan meneer dit regmaak? Is dit moontlik?"

Ollivander hou 'n bewende hand uit en Harry sit die twee helftes wat skaars nog aan mekaar vas is op sy handpalm neer.

"Steekpalm en feniksveer," sê Ollivander met 'n bewende stem. "Elf duim. Mooi soepel."

"Ja," sê Harry. "Kan u –"

"Nee," fluister Ollivander. "Ek is jammer, baie jammer, maar 'n towerstaf wat so erg beskadig is, kan nie met enige middele waarvan ek weet, herstel word nie."

Harry het hom voorberei om dit te hoor, maar dit is nogtans 'n skok. Hy neem die halwe stukke towerstaf terug en sit dit weer in die sakkie en om sy nek. Ollivander staar na die plek waar die gebreekte towerstaf verdwyn het en kyk nie weg nie totdat Harry die towerstawwe wat hy van die Malfoys af saamgebring het, uithaal.

"Kan meneer hierdie twee identifiseer?" vra Harry.

Die towerstafmaker neem die eerste towerstaf en hou dit naby sy dowwe oë, rol dit tussen sy knopperige vingers en buig dit dan effens.

"Okkerneut en draakhartsnare," sê hy. "Twaalf-en-'n-driekwart duim. Onbuigsaam. Die towerstaf behoort aan Bellatrix Lestrange."

"En hierdie een?"

Ollivander doen dieselfde ondersoek.

"Haagdoring en eenhoringhaar. Tien duim op die kop. Redelik elasties. Dit was Draco Malfoy se towerstaf."

"Was?" herhaal Harry. "Is dit nie nog steeds nie?"

"Miskien nie. As jy dit gevat het –"

"– ek het –"

"– dan is dit dalk joune. Die manier waarop jy dit afgeneem het, is natuurlik belangrik. Baie hang ook van die towerstaf self af. Maar oor die algemeen sal 'n towerstaf wat verower is, sy lojaliteit verskuif."

Dit is stil in die kamer, afgesien van die see se veraf gedruis.

"U praat van towerstawwe asof hulle gevoelens het," sê Harry, "asof hulle vir hulself kan dink."

"Die towerstaf kies die towenaar," sê Ollivander. "Dit was nog altyd duidelik vir diegene van ons wat towerstafkunde bestudeer het."

"Maar 'n mens kan 'n towerstaf wat jou nie gekies het nie nog steeds gebruik, nè?" vra Harry.

"O ja, as jy enigsins 'n towenaar is, kan jy jou towerkragte deur amper enige instrument kanaliseer. Die beste resultate word egter verkry waar daar die sterkste affiniteit tussen towenaar en towerstaf is. Hierdie verbintenisse is kompleks. 'n Aanvanklike aantrekkingskrag, en dan 'n gemeenskaplike soeke na ervaring, waartydens die towerstaf by die towenaar leer en die towenaar by die towerstaf."

Die see bruis vorentoe en agtertoe; dit is 'n droewige klank.

"Ek het die towerstaf met geweld by Draco Malfoy afgeneem," sê Harry. "Kan ek dit met veiligheid gebruik?"

"Ek dink so. Subtiele wette beheer 'n towerstaf se eienaarskap, maar die verowerde towerstaf sal gewoonlik sy wil aan sy nuwe meester s'n onderwerp."

"So ek moet hierdie een gebruik?" vra Ron en haal Wurmstert se towerstaf uit sy sak en gee dit vir Ollivander.

"Kastaiing en draakhartsnaar. Nege-en-'n-kwart duim. Bros. Ek is gedwing om dit te maak, kort nadat ek ontvoer is, vir Peter Pettigrew. Ja, as jy dit verower het, sal dit meer geneig as 'n ander towerstaf wees om jou bevele uit te voer, en dit goed doen."

"En is dit die geval met alle towerstawwe?" vra Harry.

"Ek dink so," antwoord Ollivander met sy uitpeuloë op Harry se gesig gerig. "Jy vra diep vrae, meneer Potter. Towerstafkunde is 'n komplekse en geheimnisvolle vertakking van die towerkuns."

"So dis nie nodig om die vorige eienaar dood te maak om werklik besit van 'n towerstaf te neem nie?" vra Harry.

Ollivander sluk.

"Nodig? Nee, ek sou nie sê dis nodig om iemand dood te maak nie."

"Maar daar is legendes," sê Harry, en terwyl sy hartklop versnel, word die pyn in sy litteken meer intens. Hy is seker Voldemort het besluit om sy idee uit te voer. "Legendes oor 'n towerstaf – of towerstawwe – wat van hand tot hand aangegee is as gevolg van moord."

Ollivander word bleek. Teen die sneeuwit kussing is hy liggrys en sy reusagtige, bloedbelope oë vreesagtig.

"Net een towerstaf, dink ek," fluister hy.

"En Jy-Weet-Wie stel daarin belang, of hoe?" vra Harry.

"Ek – hoe?" vra Ollivander hees en kyk smekend na Ron en Hermione om hulp. "Hoe weet jy daarvan?"

"Hy wou hê u moes vir hom sê hoe om die verbintenis tussen ons towerstawwe te oorkom," sê Harry.

Ollivander lyk angsbevange.

"Hy het my gemartel, jy moet dit verstaan! Die Cruciatusvloek, ek – ek het nie 'n keuse gehad nie; ek moes hom vertel wat ek weet, wat ek vermoed!"

"Ek verstaan," sê Harry. "U het hom van die tweelingkerns vertel? Gesê hy moet net 'n ander towenaar se towerstaf leen?"

Ollivander lyk met afgryse vervul, dronkgeslaan oor hoeveel Harry weet. Hy knik stadig.

"Maar dit het nie gewerk nie," gaan Harry aan. "Myne het nog steeds die geleende towerstaf oorwin. Weet u hoekom dit so is?"

Ollivander skud sy kop net so stadig soos hy dit nou net geknik het.

"Ek het . . . nog nooit van so iets gehoor nie. Jou towerstaf het daardie nag iets unieks gedoen. Die verbintenis tussen die twee kerns is ongelooflik raar, maar hoekom jou towerstaf die geleende een geknak het, weet ek nie . . ."

"Ons het gepraat van die ander towerstaf, die towerstaf wat van eienaar verander as gevolg van moord. Toe Jy-Weet-Wie besef my towerstaf het iets vreemds gedoen, het hy teruggekom en u oor daai ander towerstaf uitgevra, nie waar nie?"

"Hoe weet jy dit?"

Harry antwoord nie.

"Ja, hy *het* my uitgevra," fluister Ollivander. "Hy wou alles weet wat ek hom kon vertel van die towerstaf wat onder verskeie name bekend is: die Doodstok, die Towerstaf van die Noodlot of die Vlierstaf."

Harry kyk skuinsweg na Hermione. Sy lyk verbysterd.

"Die Donker Heer," sê Ollivander in 'n gedempte en bang stem, "was altyd tevrede met die towerstaf wat ek vir hom gemaak het – taksis en feniksveer, dertien-en-'n-half duim – totdat hy die verbintenis tussen die tweelingkerns ontdek het. Nou soek hy 'n ander, magtiger towerstaf, want hy glo dis die enigste manier om joune te oorwin."

"Maar hy sal binnekort weet, indien hy nie reeds weet nie, dat myne stukkend is en nie weer herstel kan word nie," sê Harry sag.

"Nee!" sê Hermione en klink bang. "Hy kan dit nie weet nie, Harry, hoe kan hy –?"

"Priori Incantatem," sê Harry. "Ons het jou towerstaf en die swartdoringtowerstaf by die Malfoys gelos, Hermione. As hulle die towerstawwe deeglik ondersoek en die towerspreuke laat herleef, wat hulle die laaste tyd uitgevoer het, sal hulle sien jy het myne probeer heelmaak, maar dit nie reggekry nie, en hulle sal besef dat ek van toe af die een van swartdoring gebruik het."

Die bietjie kleur wat sy teruggekry het sedert hulle hier is, verdwyn uit haar gesig. Ron kyk Harry verwytend aan en sê: "Kom ons bekommer ons nie nou daaroor nie – "

Maar meneer Ollivander kom tussenbeide.

"Die Donker Heer soek nie meer na die Vlierstaf net om jou te vernietig nie, meneer Potter. Hy is vasberade om dit te besit, want hy glo dit sal hom waarlik onoorwinlik maak."

"En sal dit?"

"Die Vlierstaf se eienaar moet altyd op sy hoede wees vir aanvalle," sê Ollivander, "maar ek moet erken, die idee van die Donker Heer in besit van die Doodstok is . . . ontsagwekkend."

Harry onthou skielik hy was die eerste keer toe hulle mekaar ontmoet het onseker hoeveel hy van Ollivander hou. Selfs noudat Voldemort hom gemartel en gevange gehou het, is die idee van 'n Donker towenaar in besit van hierdie towerstaf blykbaar vir hom net so fassinerend as wat dit skrikwekkend is.

"Dan – dan dink u regtig daardie towerstaf bestaan, meneer Ollivander?" vra Hermione.

"O ja," sê Ollivander. "Ja, dit is heeltemal moontlik om die towerstaf se pad deur die geskiedenis te volg. Daar is natuurlik gapings, en langes ook, wanneer dit verdwyn, wanneer dit tydelik verlore raak of weggesteek word, maar dit duik altyd weer op. Dit het sekere identifiserende kenmerke wat diegene wat in towerstafkunde geskool is, herken. Daar is geskrewe mededelings, sommige van hulle obskuur, wat ek en ander towerstafmakers met groot aandag bestudeer het. Hulle klink baie geloofwaardig."

"So u dink nie dis 'n sprokie of 'n mite nie?" vra Hermione hoopvol.

"Nee," sê Ollivander. "Ek weet nie of dit *noodwendig* deur moord verower moet word nie. Die staf het 'n bloedige geskiedenis, maar dit kan bloot te wyte wees aan die feit dat dit so 'n gesogte voorwerp is en soveel passie in towenaars wakker maak. Dit is geweldig magtig, gevaarlik in die verkeerde hande, en 'n ongelooflik fassinerende voorwerp vir almal van ons wat die mag van towerstawwe bestudeer."

"Meneer Ollivander," sê Harry, "u het vir Jy-Weet-Wie gesê Gregorovitch het die Vlierstaf, nè?"

Ollivander word nog bleker, as dit moontlik is. Hy lyk soos 'n spook en snak na asem.

"Maar hoe – hoe weet jy?"

"Dit maak nie saak nie," sê Harry. Hy maak sy oë vlugtig toe terwyl sy litteken brand en hy sien, net 'n paar sekondes lank, 'n beeld van die hoofstraat in Hogsmeade waar dit nog donker is omdat dit soveel verder noord is. "Het u vir Jy-Weet-Wie gesê Gregorovitch het die towerstaf?"

"Dit was 'n gerug," fluister Ollivander. "'n Gerug, jare en jare gelede, lank voor jy gebore is! Ek vermoed Gregorovitch het dit self begin. Jy kan jou indink hoe goed dit vir besigheid moet gewees het: dat hy die Vlierstaf se eienskappe bestudeer en dupliseer!"

"Ja, ek kan dink," sê Harry. Hy staan op. "Meneer Ollivander, nog 'n laaste ding, en dan sal ons u laat rus. Wat weet u van die Skatte van die Dood af?

"Die – die wat?" vra die towerstafmaker en lyk heeltemal in die war.

“Die Skatte van die Dood.”
“Ek’s bevrees ek weet nie waarvan jy praat nie. Is dit nog iets wat met towerstawwe te doen het?”
Harry kyk na die ingevalle gesig en glo Ollivander speel nie toneel nie. Hy weet nie van die Skatte nie.
“Dankie,” sê Harry. “Baie dankie. Ons sal u nou los dat u kan rus.”
Ollivander lyk verslae.
“Hy het my gemartel!” snak hy. “Die Cruciatusvloek . . . jy het nie ’n idee nie . . .”
“Ek het,” sê Harry. “Ek het regtig. Rus asseblief nou. Dankie vir alles wat u my vertel het.”
Hy lei Ron en Hermione by die trap af. Harry sien skrams hoe sit Bill, Fleur, Luna en Dean by die kombuistafel met koppies tee voor hulle. Hulle kyk op toe Harry in die deuropening verskyn, maar hy knik net vir hulle en stap uit tuin toe met Ron en Hermione agterna. Die rooierige hopie grond wat Dobby bedek, lê voor hom en Harry loop terug soontoe terwyl die pyn in sy kop al sterker en sterker opbou. Dit verg nou groot inspanning om die beelde wat hulle aan hom opdwing, weg te hou, maar hy weet hy moet hulle net nog ’n rukkie langer weerstaan. Hy gaan binnekort aan hulle toegee, want hy moet weet of sy teorie reg is. Hy moet nog net ’n bietjie, ’n klein bietjie, uithou sodat hy vir Ron en Hermione kan verduidelik.
“Gregorovitch het die Vlierstaf gehad, lank gelede,” sê hy. “Ek het gesien hoe soek Jy-Weet-Wie na hom. Toe hy hom uiteindelik opspoor, het hy uitgevind Gregorovitch het dit nie meer nie: Grindelwald het dit by hom gesteel. Ek weet nie hoe Grindelwald uitgevind het Gregorovitch het dit nie – maar as Gregorovitch onnosel genoeg was om die gerug te versprei, kon dit nie so moeilik gewees het nie.”
Voldemort is by Hogwarts se hekke; Harry sien hom daar staan en hy sien ook die dobberende lamp wat in die voordag al nader en nader kom.
“En Grindelwald het die Vlierstaf gebruik om magtig te word. En aan die toppunt van sy mag, toe Dumbledore geweet het hy’s die enigste een wat hom kan stop, het hy Grindelwald tot ’n tweegeveg uitgedaag en hom verslaan en die Vlierstaf gevat.”
“*Dumbledore* het die Vlierstaf gehad?” vra Ron. “Maar – waar is dit dan nou?”
“By Hogwarts,” sê Harry en veg om by hulle te bly in die tuin bo-op die krans.

"Nou maar kom ons waai!" sê Ron dringend. "Harry, kom ons gaan haal dit, voor hy dit doen."

"Dis te laat," sê Harry. Hy kan homself nie help nie, hy gryp sy kop vas in 'n poging om weerstand te bied. "Hy weet waar dit is. Hy's nou daar."

"Harry!" roep Ron woedend uit. "Hoe lank weet jy dit al – hoekom het ons tyd gemors? Hoekom het jy eers met Griphook gepraat? Ons kon soontoe gegaan het – ons kan nog steeds –"

"Nee," sê Harry en hy sink op sy knieë op die gras neer. "Hermione is reg. Dumbledore wou nie hê ek moet dit kry nie. Hy wou nie hê ek moet dit vat nie. Hy wou hê ek moet die Horcruxe kry."

"Die onoorwinlike towerstaf, Harry!" kreun Ron.

"Ek is nie veronderstel om . . . Ek is veronderstel om die Horcruxe te kry . . ."

En nou is alles koel en donker: die son is skaars sigbaar oor die horison terwyl hy langs Snape gly, op deur die skoolterrein na die meer toe.

"Ek sluit binnekort by jou aan in die kasteel," sê hy in sy hoë, koue stem. "Laat my nou alleen."

Snape buig en mik weer terug met die voetpad op terwyl sy swart mantel agter hom bol staan. Harry loop stadig en wag tot Snape se figuur verdwyn. Dit sal nie deug dat Snape, of trouens enigiemand anders, sien waarheen hy gaan nie. Maar daar is nie ligte in die kasteel se vensters nie en hy kan homself verberg . . . en binne 'n sekonde spreek hy 'n Ontgogelingstowerspreuk oor homself uit wat hom selfs vir sy eie oë onsigbaar maak.

En hy stap verder, om die rand van die meer en neem die buitelyne van die geliefde kasteel in, sy eerste koninkryk, sy geboortereg . . .

En hier is dit, langs die meer, weerkaats in die donker water. Die wit marmergraf, 'n onnodige ontsiering van die bekende landskap. Hy voel weer daardie opwelling van beheerste euforie, daardie lighoofdige gevoel van doelgerigtheid wat verwoesting hom gee. Hy lig die ou taksistowerstaf: hoe gepas dat dit sy laaste groot daad sal wees.

Die graf bars van bo tot onder oop. Die figuur in die doodskleed is so lank en maer soos toe dit gelewe het. Hy lig die towerstaf weer.

Die doodskleed val oop. Die gesig is deurskynend, bleek, ingevalle, nietemin amper perfek bewaar. Hulle het die bril op die krom neus gelos: hy wil honend lag. Dumbledore se hande is oor sy borskas gevou en daaronder lê dit, saam met hom begrawe.

Het die ou gek gedink marmer of die dood sou die towerstaf

beskerm? Het hy gedink die Donker Heer sal bang wees om sy graf te skend? Die spinnekopagtige hand skiet uit en pluk die towerstaf uit Dumbledore se greep, en toe hy dit vat, spat daar 'n vlaag vonke uit die punt en glinster oor sy laaste eienaar se lyk, gereed om uiteindelik 'n nuwe meester te dien.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



SHELL COTTAGE

Bill and Fleur's cottage stood alone on a cliff overlooking the sea, its walls embedded with shells and whitewashed. It was a lonely and beautiful place. Wherever Harry went inside the tiny cottage or its garden, he could hear the constant ebb and flow of the sea, like the breathing of some great, slumbering creature. He spent much of the next few days making excuses to escape the crowded cottage, craving the cliff-top view of open sky and wide, empty sea, and the feel of cold, salty wind on his face.

The enormity of his decision not to race Voldemort to the wand still scared Harry. He could not remember, ever before, choosing *not* to act. He was full of doubts, doubts that Ron could not help voicing whenever they were together.

"What if Dumbledore wanted us to work out the symbol in time to get the wand?" "What if working out what the symbol meant made you 'worthy' to get the Hallows?" "Harry, if that really is the Elder Wand, how the hell are we supposed to finish off You-Know-Who?"

Harry had no answers: There were moments when he wondered whether it had been outright madness not to try to prevent Voldemort breaking open the tomb. He could not even explain satisfactorily why he had decided against it: Every time he tried to reconstruct the internal arguments that had led to his decision, they sounded feebler to him.

The odd thing was that Hermione's support made him feel just as confused as Ron's doubts. Now forced to accept that the Elder Wand was real, she maintained that it was an evil object, and that the way Voldemort had taken possession of it was repellent, not to be considered.

"You could never have done that, Harry," she said again and again. "You couldn't have broken into Dumbledore's grave."

But the idea of Dumbledore's corpse frightened Harry much less than the possibility that he might have misunderstood the living Dumbledore's intentions. He felt that he was still groping in the dark; he had chosen his path but kept looking back, wondering whether he had misread the signs, whether he should not have taken the other way. From time to time, anger at Dumbledore crashed over him again, powerful as the waves slamming themselves against the cliff beneath the cottage, anger that Dumbledore had not explained before he died.

"But *is* he dead?" said Ron, three days after they had arrived at the

cottage. Harry had been staring out over the wall that separated the cottage garden from the cliff when Ron and Hermione had found him; he wished they had not, having no wish to join in with their argument.

“Yes, he is, Ron, *please* don’t start that again!”

“Look at the facts, Hermione,” said Ron, speaking across Harry, who continued to gaze at the horizon. “The silver doe. The sword. The eye Harry saw in the mirror —”

“Harry admits he could have imagined the eye! Don’t you, Harry?”

“I could have,” said Harry without looking at her.

“But you don’t think you did, do you?” asked Ron.

“No, I don’t,” said Harry.

“There you go!” said Ron quickly, before Hermione could carry on. “If it wasn’t Dumbledore, explain how Dobby knew we were in the cellar, Hermione?”

“I can’t — but can you explain how Dumbledore sent him to us if he’s lying in a tomb at Hogwarts?”

“I dunno, it could’ve been his ghost!”

“Dumbledore wouldn’t come back as a ghost,” said Harry. There was little about Dumbledore he was sure of now, but he knew that much. “He would have gone on.”

“What d’you mean, ‘gone on’?” asked Ron, but before Harry could say any more, a voice behind them said, “’Arry?”

Fleur had come out of the cottage, her long silver hair flying in the breeze.

“’Arry, Grip’ook would like to speak to you. ’E eez in ze smallest bedroom, ’e says ’e does not want to be over’eard.”

Her dislike of the goblin sending her to deliver messages was clear; she looked irritable as she walked back around the house.

Griphook was waiting for them, as Fleur had said, in the tiniest of the cottage's three bedrooms, in which Hermione and Luna slept by night. He had drawn the red cotton curtains against the bright, cloudy sky, which gave the room a fiery glow at odds with the rest of the airy, light cottage.

"I have reached my decision, Harry Potter," said the goblin, who was sitting cross-legged in a low chair, drumming its arms with his spindly fingers. "Though the goblins of Gringotts will consider it base treachery, I have decided to help you —"

"That's great!" said Harry, relief surging through him. "Griphook, thank you, we're really —"

"— in return," said the goblin firmly, "for payment."

Slightly taken aback, Harry hesitated.

"How much do you want? I've got gold."

"Not gold," said Griphook. "I have gold."

His black eyes glittered; there were no whites to his eyes.

"I want the sword. The sword of Godric Gryffindor."

Harry's spirits plummeted.

"You can't have that," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Then," said the goblin softly, "we have a problem."

"We can give you something else," said Ron eagerly. "I'll bet the Lestranges have got loads of stuff, you can take your pick once we get into the vault."

He had said the wrong thing. Griphook flushed angrily.

"I am not a thief, boy! I am not trying to procure treasures to which I have no right!"

"The sword's ours —"

"It is not," said the goblin.

"We're Gryffindors, and it was Godric Gryffindor's —"

"And before it was Gryffindor's, whose was it?" demanded the goblin, sitting up straight.

"No one's," said Ron. "It was made for him, wasn't it?"

"No!" cried the goblin, bristling with anger as he pointed a long finger at Ron. "Wizarding arrogance again! That sword was Ragnuk the First's, taken from him by Godric Gryffindor! It is a lost treasure, a masterpiece of goblinwork! It belongs with the goblins! The sword is the price of my hire, take it or leave it!"

Griphook glared at them. Harry glanced at the other two, then said, "We need to discuss this, Griphook, if that's all right. Could you give us a few minutes?"

The goblin nodded, looking sour.

Downstairs in the empty sitting room, Harry walked to the fireplace, brow furrowed, trying to think what to do. Behind him, Ron said, "He's having a laugh. We can't let him have that sword."

"It is true?" Harry asked Hermione. "Was the sword stolen by Gryffindor?"

"I don't know," she said hopelessly. "Wizarding history often skates over what the wizards have done to other magical races, but there's no account that I know of that says Gryffindor stole the sword."

"It'll be one of those goblin stories," said Ron, "about how the

wizards are always trying to get one over on them. I suppose we should think ourselves lucky he hasn't asked for one of our wands."

"Goblins have got good reason to dislike wizards, Ron," said Hermione. "They've been treated brutally in the past."

"Goblins aren't exactly fluffy little bunnies, though, are they?" said Ron. "They've killed plenty of us. They've fought dirty too."

"But arguing with Griphook about whose race is most underhanded and violent isn't going to make him more likely to help us, is it?"

There was a pause while they tried to think of a way around the problem. Harry looked out of the window at Dobby's grave. Luna was arranging sea lavender in a jam jar beside the headstone.

"Okay," said Ron, and Harry turned back to face him, "how's this? We tell Griphook we need the sword until we get inside the vault, and then he can have it. There's a fake in there, isn't there? We switch them, and give him the fake."

"Ron, he'd know the difference better than we would!" said Hermione. "He's the only one who realized there had been a swap!"

"Yeah, but we could scarper before he realizes —"

He quailed beneath the look Hermione was giving him.

"That," she said quietly, "is despicable. Ask for his help, then double-cross him? And you wonder why goblins don't like wizards, Ron?"

Ron's ears had turned red.

"All right, all right! It was the only thing I could think of! What's your solution, then?"

"We need to offer him something else, something just as valuable."

"Brilliant. I'll go and get one of our other ancient goblin-made

swords and you can gift wrap it."

Silence fell between them again. Harry was sure that the goblin would accept nothing but the sword, even if they had something as valuable to offer him. Yet the sword was their one, indispensable weapon against the Horcruxes.

He closed his eyes for a moment or two and listened to the rush of the sea. The idea that Gryffindor might have stolen the sword was unpleasant to him: He had always been proud to be a Gryffindor; Gryffindor had been the champion of Muggle-borns, the wizard who had clashed with the pureblood-loving Slytherin. . . .

"Maybe he's lying," Harry said, opening his eyes again. "Griphook. Maybe Gryffindor didn't take the sword. How do we know the goblin version of history's right?"

"Does it make a difference?" asked Hermione.

"Changes how I feel about it," said Harry.

He took a deep breath.

"We'll tell him he can have the sword after he's helped us get into that vault — but we'll be careful to avoid telling him exactly *when* he can have it."

A grin spread slowly across Ron's face. Hermione, however, looked alarmed.

"Harry, we can't —"

"He can have it," Harry went on, "after we've used it on all of the Horcruxes. I'll make sure he gets it then. I'll keep my word."

"But that could be years!" said Hermione.

"I know that, but *he* needn't. I won't be lying . . . really."

Harry met her eyes with a mixture of defiance and shame. He

remembered the words that had been engraved over the gateway to Nurmengard: FOR THE GREATER GOOD. He pushed the idea away. What choice did they have?

"I don't like it," said Hermione.

"Nor do I, much," Harry admitted.

"Well, I think it's genius," said Ron, standing up again. "Let's go and tell him."

Back in the smallest bedroom, Harry made the offer, careful to phrase it so as not to give any definite time for the handover of the sword. Hermione frowned at the floor while he was speaking; he felt irritated at her, afraid that she might give the game away. However, Griphook had eyes for nobody but Harry.

"I have your word, Harry Potter, that you will give me the sword of Gryffindor if I help you?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Then shake," said the goblin, holding out his hand.

Harry took it and shook. He wondered whether those black eyes saw any misgivings in his own. Then Griphook relinquished him, clapped his hands together, and said, "So. We begin!"

It was like planning to break into the Ministry all over again. They settled to work in the smallest bedroom, which was kept, according to Griphook's preference, in semidarkness.

"I have visited the Lestranges' vault only once," Griphook told them, "on the occasion I was told to place inside it the false sword. It is one of the most ancient chambers. The oldest Wizarding families store their treasures at the deepest level, where the vaults are largest and best protected. . . ."

They remained shut in the cupboardlike room for hours at a time. Slowly the days stretched into weeks. There was problem after problem to overcome, not least of which was that their store of Polyjuice Potion was greatly depleted.

"There's really only enough left for one of us," said Hermione, tilting the thick mudlike potion against the lamplight.

"That'll be enough," said Harry, who was examining Griphook's hand-drawn map of the deepest passageways.

The other inhabitants of Shell Cottage could hardly fail to notice that something was going on now that Harry, Ron, and Hermione only emerged for mealtimes. Nobody asked questions, although Harry often felt Bill's eyes on the three of them at the table, thoughtful, concerned.

The longer they spent together, the more Harry realized that he did not much like the goblin. Griphook was unexpectedly bloodthirsty, laughed at the idea of pain in lesser creatures, and seemed to relish the possibility that they might have to hurt other wizards to reach the Lestranges' vault. Harry could tell that his distaste was shared by the other two, but they did not discuss it: They needed Griphook.

The goblin ate only grudgingly with the rest of them. Even after his legs had mended, he continued to request trays of food in his room, like the still-frail Ollivander, until Bill (following an angry outburst from Fleur) went upstairs to tell him that the arrangement could not continue. Thereafter Griphook joined them at the overcrowded table, although he refused to eat the same food, insisting, instead, on lumps of raw meat, roots, and various fungi.

Harry felt responsible: It was, after all, he who had insisted that

the goblin remain at Shell Cottage so that he could question him; his fault that the whole Weasley family had been driven into hiding, that Bill, Fred, George, and Mr. Weasley could no longer work.

"I'm sorry," he told Fleur, one blustery April evening as he helped her prepare dinner. "I never meant you to have to deal with all of this."

She had just set some knives to work, chopping up steaks for Griphook and Bill, who had preferred his meat bloody ever since he had been attacked by Greyback. While the knives sliced away behind her, her somewhat irritable expression softened.

"'Arry, you saved my sister's life, I do not forget."

This was not, strictly speaking, true, but Harry decided against reminding her that Gabrielle had never been in real danger.

"Anyway," Fleur went on, pointing her wand at a pot of sauce on the stove, which began to bubble at once, "Mr. Ollivander leaves for Muriel's zis evening. Zat will make zings easier. Ze goblin," she scowled a little at the mention of him, "can move downstairs, and you, Ron, and Dean can take zat room."

"We don't mind sleeping in the living room," said Harry, who knew that Griphook would think poorly of having to sleep on the sofa; keeping Griphook happy was essential to their plans. "Don't worry about us." And when she tried to protest he went on, "We'll be off your hands soon too, Ron, Hermione, and I. We won't need to be here much longer."

"But what do you mean?" she said, frowning at him, her wand pointing at the casserole dish now suspended in midair. "Of course you must not leave, you are safe 'ere!"

She looked rather like Mrs. Weasley as she said it, and he was glad that the back door opened at that moment. Luna and Dean entered, their hair damp from the rain outside and their arms full of driftwood.

". . . and tiny little ears," Luna was saying, "a bit like a hippo's, Daddy says, only purple and hairy. And if you want to call them, you have to hum; they prefer a waltz, nothing too fast. . . ."

Looking uncomfortable, Dean shrugged at Harry as he passed, following Luna into the combined dining and sitting room where Ron and Hermione were laying the dinner table. Seizing the chance to escape Fleur's questions, Harry grabbed two jugs of pumpkin juice and followed them.

". . . and if you ever come to our house I'll be able to show you the horn, Daddy wrote to me about it but I haven't seen it yet, because the Death Eaters took me from the Hogwarts Express and I never got home for Christmas," Luna was saying, as she and Dean relaid the fire.

"Luna, we told you," Hermione called over to her. "That horn exploded. It came from an Erumpent, not a Crumple-Horned Snorkack —"

"No, it was definitely a Snorkack horn," said Luna serenely. "Daddy told me. It will probably have re-formed by now, they mend themselves, you know."

Hermione shook her head and continued laying down forks as Bill appeared, leading Mr. Ollivander down the stairs. The wandmaker still looked exceptionally frail, and he clung to Bill's arm as the latter supported him, carrying a large suitcase.

"I'm going to miss you, Mr. Ollivander," said Luna, approaching the old man.

"And I you, my dear," said Ollivander, patting her on the shoulder. "You were an inexpressible comfort to me in that terrible place."

"So, *au revoir,* Mr. Ollivander," said Fleur, kissing him on both cheeks. "And I wonder whezzer you could oblige me by delivering a package to Bill's Auntie Muriel? I never returned 'er tiara."

"It will be an honor," said Ollivander with a little bow, "the very least I can do in return for your generous hospitality."

Fleur drew out a worn velvet case, which she opened to show the wandmaker. The tiara sat glittering and twinkling in the light from the low-hanging lamp.

"Moonstones and diamonds," said Griphook, who had sidled into the room without Harry noticing. "Made by goblins, I think?"

"And paid for by wizards," said Bill quietly, and the goblin shot him a look that was both furtive and challenging.

A strong wind gusted against the cottage windows as Bill and Ollivander set off into the night. The rest of them squeezed in around the table; elbow to elbow and with barely enough room to move, they started to eat. The fire crackled and popped in the grate beside them. Fleur, Harry noticed, was merely playing with her food; she glanced at the window every few minutes; however, Bill returned before they had finished their first course, his long hair tangled by the wind.

"Everything's fine," he told Fleur. "Ollivander settled in, Mum and Dad say hello. Ginny sends you all her love. Fred and George are driving Muriel up the wall, they're still operating an Owl-Order business out of her back room. It cheered her up to have her tiara

back, though. She said she thought we'd stolen it."

"Ah, she eez *charmante*, your aunt," said Fleur crossly, waving her wand and causing the dirty plates to rise and form a stack in midair. She caught them and marched out of the room.

"Daddy's made a tiara," piped up Luna. "Well, more of a crown, really."

Ron caught Harry's eye and grinned; Harry knew that he was remembering the ludicrous headdress they had seen on their visit to Xenophilius.

"Yes, he's trying to re-create the lost diadem of Ravenclaw. He thinks he's identified most of the main elements now. Adding the billywig wings really made a difference —"

There was a bang on the front door. Everyone's head turned toward it. Fleur came running out of the kitchen, looking frightened; Bill jumped to his feet, his wand pointing at the door; Harry, Ron, and Hermione did the same. Silently Griphook slipped beneath the table, out of sight.

"Who is it?" Bill called.

"It is I, Remus John Lupin!" called a voice over the howling wind. Harry experienced a thrill of fear; what had happened? "I am a werewolf, married to Nymphadora Tonks, and you, the Secret-Keeper of Shell Cottage, told me the address and bade me come in an emergency!"

"Lupin," muttered Bill, and he ran to the door and wrenched it open.

Lupin fell over the threshold. He was white-faced, wrapped in a traveling cloak, his graying hair windswept. He straightened up,

looked around the room, making sure of who was there, then cried aloud, "It's a boy! We've named him Ted, after Dora's father!"

Hermione shrieked.

"Wha — ? Tonks — Tonks has had the baby?"

"Yes, yes, she's had the baby!" shouted Lupin. All around the table came cries of delight, sighs of relief: Hermione and Fleur both squealed, "Congratulations!" and Ron said, "Blimey, a baby!" as if he had never heard of such a thing before.

"Yes — yes — a boy," said Lupin again, who seemed dazed by his own happiness. He strode around the table and hugged Harry; the scene in the basement of Grimmauld Place might never have happened.

"You'll be godfather?" he said as he released Harry.

"M-me?" stammered Harry.

"You, yes, of course — Dora quite agrees, no one better —"

"I — yeah — blimey —"

Harry felt overwhelmed, astonished, delighted; now Bill was hurrying to fetch wine, and Fleur was persuading Lupin to join them for a drink.

"I can't stay long, I must get back," said Lupin, beaming around at them all: He looked years younger than Harry had ever seen him. "Thank you, thank you, Bill."

Bill had soon filled all of their goblets, they stood and raised them high in a toast.

"To Teddy Remus Lupin," said Lupin, "a great wizard in the making!"

"'Oo does 'e look like?" Fleur inquired.

"I think he looks like Dora, but she thinks he is like me. Not much hair. It looked black when he was born, but I swear it's turned ginger in the hour since. Probably be blond by the time I get back. Andromeda says Tonks's hair started changing color the day that she was born." He drained his goblet. "Oh, go on then, just one more," he added, beaming, as Bill made to fill it again.

The wind buffeted the little cottage and the fire leapt and crackled, and Bill was soon opening another bottle of wine. Lupin's news seemed to have taken them out of themselves, removed them for a while from their state of siege: Tidings of new life were exhilarating. Only the goblin seemed untouched by the suddenly festive atmosphere, and after a while he slunk back to the bedroom he now occupied alone. Harry thought he was the only one who had noticed this, until he saw Bill's eyes following the goblin up the stairs.

"No . . . no . . . I really must get back," said Lupin at last, declining yet another goblet of wine. He got to his feet and pulled his traveling cloak back around himself.

"Good-bye, good-bye — I'll try and bring some pictures in a few days' time — they'll all be so glad to know that I've seen you —"

He fastened his cloak and made his farewells, hugging the women and grasping hands with the men, then, still beaming, returned into the wild night.

"Godfather, Harry!" said Bill as they walked into the kitchen together, helping clear the table. "A real honor! Congratulations!"

As Harry set down the empty goblets he was carrying, Bill pulled the door behind him closed, shutting out the still-voluble voices of the others, who were continuing to celebrate even in Lupin's absence.

"I wanted a private word, actually, Harry. It hasn't been easy to get an opportunity with the cottage this full of people."

Bill hesitated.

"Harry, you're planning something with Griphook."

It was a statement, not a question, and Harry did not bother to deny it. He merely looked at Bill, waiting.

"I know goblins," said Bill. "I've worked for Gringotts ever since I left Hogwarts. As far as there can be friendship between wizards and goblins, I have goblin friends — or, at least, goblins I know well, and like." Again, Bill hesitated.

"Harry, what do you want from Griphook, and what have you promised him in return?"

"I can't tell you that," said Harry. "Sorry, Bill."

The kitchen door opened behind them; Fleur was trying to bring through more empty goblets.

"Wait," Bill told her. "Just a moment."

She backed out and he closed the door again.

"Then I have to say this," Bill went on. "If you have struck any kind of bargain with Griphook, and most particularly if that bargain involves treasure, you must be exceptionally careful. Goblin notions of ownership, payment, and repayment are not the same as human ones."

Harry felt a slight squirm of discomfort, as though a small snake had stirred inside him.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"We are talking about a different breed of being," said Bill. "Dealings between wizards and goblins have been fraught for

centuries — but you'll know all that from History of Magic. There has been fault on both sides, I would never claim that wizards have been innocent. However, there is a belief among some goblins, and those at Gringotts are perhaps most prone to it, that wizards cannot be trusted in matters of gold and treasure, that they have no respect for goblin ownership."

"I respect —" Harry began, but Bill shook his head.

"You don't understand, Harry, nobody could understand unless they have lived with goblins. To a goblin, the rightful and true master of any object is the maker, not the purchaser. All goblin-made objects are, in goblin eyes, rightfully theirs."

"But if it was bought —"

"— then they would consider it rented by the one who had paid the money. They have, however, great difficulty with the idea of goblin-made objects passing from wizard to wizard. You saw Griphook's face when the tiara passed under his eyes. He disapproves. I believe he thinks, as do the fiercest of his kind, that it ought to have been returned to the goblins once the original purchaser died. They consider our habit of keeping goblin-made objects, passing them from wizard to wizard without further payment, little more than theft."

Harry had an ominous feeling now; he wondered whether Bill guessed more than he was letting on.

"All I am saying," said Bill, setting his hand on the door back into the sitting room, "is to be very careful what you promise goblins, Harry. It would be less dangerous to break into Gringotts than to renege on a promise to a goblin."

"Right," said Harry as Bill opened the door, "yeah. Thanks. I'll bear that in mind."

As he followed Bill back to the others a wry thought came to him, born no doubt of the wine he had drunk. He seemed set on course to become just as reckless a godfather to Teddy Lupin as Sirius Black had been to him.

— HOOFSTUK VYF-EN-TWINTIG —

Die Skulphuisie

Bill en Fleur se kothuis staan op 'n krans wat oor die see uitkyk; skulpe is in die mure ingemessel en afgewit. Dit is 'n afgesonderde en pragtige plek. Waar ook al Harry in die huisie of die tuin gaan, hoor hy die see se konstante eb en vloei, soos 'n groot, sluimerende dierasie se asemhaling. Hy dink die volgende paar dae gereeld verskonings uit om uit die oorvol huis te ontsnap, want hy smag na die uitsig van die krans met die blou lug en die wye, oop see, en die gevoel van die koue soutwind op sy gesig.

Die geweldige implikasies van sy besluit om nie teen Voldemort resies te jaag vir die towerstaf nie, maak Harry steeds bang. Hy kan nie onthou dat hy al ooit voorheen gekies het om *nie* op te tree nie. Hy is vol vertwyfeling, vertwyfeling wat Ron nie kan help om te verwoord wanneer hulle bymekaar is nie.

"Sê nou Dumbledore wou hê ons moes uitwerk wat die simbool beteken sodat ons die towerstaf betyds kon kry?" "Sê nou as 'n mens uitgewerk het wat die simbool beteken, maak dit jou 'waardig' om die Skatte te kry?" "Harry, as dit regtig die Vlierstaf is, hoe de hel is ons veronderstel om met Jy-Weet-Wie af te reken?"

Harry het nie antwoorde nie: daar is oomblikke wanneer hy wonder of dit louter waansin was om nie te probeer keer dat Voldemort die graf oopbreek nie. Hy kan nie eens 'n bevredigende verduideliking gee vir hoekom hy daarteen besluit het nie: elke keer dat hy die innerlike argumente wat tot sy besluit gelei het, probeer rekonstrueer, klink dit vir hom nog flouer.

Die vreemde ding is dat Hermione se steun hom net so verward maak soos Ron se twyfel. Noudat sy noodgedwonge moet aanvaar die Vlierstaf bestaan wel, hou sy vol dit is 'n bose ding, en die manier waarop Voldemort dit in sy besit gekry het, is afstootlik, iets wat 'n mens nie eens durf oorweeg nie.

"Jy sou dit nooit kon gedoen het nie, Harry," sê sy oor en oor. "Jy sou nie by Dumbledore se graf kon inbreek nie."

Maar die idee van Dumbledore se lyk is vir Harry baie minder

skrikwekkend as die moontlikheid dat hy die lewende Dumbledore se bedoelings verkeerd verstaan het. Hy voel hy tas steeds in die donker rond; hy het hierdie pad gekies, maar kyk aanhoudend terug en wonder of hy die tekens verkeerd gelees het, of hy nie die ander rigting moes ingeslaan het nie. Van tyd tot tyd bars woede teenoor Dumbledore weer in hom los, so oorweldigend soos die golwe wat onder die kothuis teen die krans vasslaan, woede omdat Dumbledore niks verduidelik het voor hy dood is nie.

"Maar *is* hy dood?" vra Ron drie dae nadat hulle by die kothuis aangekom het. Harry het staan en uitstaar oor die muur wat die kothuis se tuin van die krans skei toe Ron en Hermione hom kry; hy wens hulle het nie, want hy is allesbehalwe lus om by hulle stryery betrek te word.

"Ja, hy is, Ron, moet *asseblief* nie weer daarmee begin nie!"

"Kyk na die feite, Hermione," sê Ron en praat verby Harry wat aanhou om na die horison te tuur. "Die silwer takbokooi. Die swaard. Die oog wat Harry in die spieël gesien het –"

"Harry erken die oog kon sy verbeelding gewees het! Of hoe, Harry?"

"Miskien," sê Harry sonder om na haar te kyk.

"Maar jy dink nie regtig so nie, nè?" vra Ron.

"Nee," sê Harry.

"Daar het jy dit!" sê Ron vinnig voor Hermione kan aangaan. "As dit nie Dumbledore was nie, verduidelik vir my hoe Dobby geweet het ons is in die kelder, Hermione!"

"Ek kan nie – maar kan jy verduidelik hoe Dumbledore hom na ons toe gestuur het as hy in 'n graf by Hogwarts lê?"

"Ek weet nie, dit kon sy spook gewees het!"

"Dumbledore sal nie as 'n spook terugkom nie," sê Harry. Daar is deesdae min dinge rakende Dumbledore waarvan hy seker is, maar hy weet dit ten minste. "Hy sou aanbeweeg het."

"Wat bedoel jy, 'aanbeweeg het'?" vra Ron, maar voor Harry enigiets meer kan sê, sê 'n stem agter hulle: "'arry?"

Fleur het by die kothuis uitgekom. Haar lang silwer hare wapper in die bries.

"'Arry, Grip'ook wil graag met julle praat. 'y is in die kleinste kamer, 'y sê 'y wil nie afgeluister word nie."

Haar misnoeë met die kabouter wat haar stuur om boodskappe oor te dra, is duidelik; sy lyk geïrriteerd toe sy terug om die huisie loop.

Griphook wag vir hulle, soos Fleur gesê het, in die kleinste van die kothuis se drie slaapkamers, die een waarin Hermione en Luna

slaap. Hy het die rooi katoengordyne teen die helder, bewolkte lug toegetrek sodat die kamer in 'n vurige gloed gehul is in teenstelling met die res van die lugtige, ligte kothuis.

"Ek het tot 'n besluit gekom, Harry Potter," sê die kabouter, wat kruisbeen in 'n lae stoel sit en met sy spykervingers op die armleunings trommel. "Hoewel Gringotts se kabouters dit as veragtelike verraad sal beskou, het ek besluit om julle te help –"

"Dis wonderlik!" sê Harry terwyl verligting in hom opwel. "Dankie, Griphook, ons is regtig –"

"– in ruil," sê die kabouter ferm, "vir betaling."

Harry huiwer, effens uit die veld geslaan.

"Hoeveel wil jy hê? Ek het goud."

"Nie goud nie," sê Griphook. "Ek het goud."

Sy swart oë glinster; daar is geen wit in sy oë nie.

"Ek wil die swaard hê. Godric Gryffindor se swaard."

Harry se moed sak in sy skoene.

"Jy kan dit nie kry nie," sê hy. "Ek is jammer."

"Dan," sê die kabouter sag, "het ons 'n probleem."

"Ons kan vir jou iets anders gee," sê Ron gretig. "Ek wed jou die Lestranges het hope goed, jy kan self iets kies wanneer ons by die kluis inkom."

Hy het die verkeerde ding gesê. Griphook word rooi van ergernis.

"Ek is nie 'n dief nie, seun! Ek probeer nie skatte inpalm waarop ek g'n reg het nie!"

"Die swaard is ons s'n –"

"Dit is nie," sê die kabouter.

"Ons is Gryffindors en dit was Godric Gryffindor s'n –"

"En voor dit Gryffindor s'n was, wie s'n was dit toe?" daag die kabouter hom uit en sit nou kiertsregop.

"Niemand s'n nie," sê Ron. "Dis vir hom gemaak, is dit nie?"

"Nee!" roep die kabouter uit en wys bewend van woede met 'n lang vinger na Ron. "Al weer towenaararrogansie! Daai swaard het aan Ragnuk die Eerste behoort; Godric Gryffindor het dit by hom afgeneem! Dit is 'n verlore skat, 'n kaboutermeesterstuk! Dit hoort by die kabouters! Die swaard is die prys vir my dienste, vat dit of laat staan!"

Griphook gluur hulle aan. Harry loer na die ander twee en sê dan: "Ons moet dit eers bespreek, Griphook, as dit oukei is. Kan jy ons 'n paar minute gee?"

Die kabouter knik, maar lyk suur.

Onder in die leë sitkamer loop Harry na die kaggel toe en won-

der met 'n frons wat om te doen. Agter hom sê Ron: "Hy's lekker laf. Ons kan nie vir hom daai swaard gee nie."

"Is dit waar?" vra Harry vir Hermione. "Het Gryffindor die swaard gesteel?"

"Ek weet nie," sê sy moedeloos. "Die towergeskiedenis gly dikwels liggies oor wat towenaars aan ander towerrasse gedoen het, maar sover ek weet, word dit nêrens genoem dat Gryffindor die swaard gesteel het nie."

"Dis weer een van daai kabouterstories," sê Ron, "oor hoe die towenaars hulle altyd probeer inloop. Ons moet seker bly wees hy't nie vir een van ons towerstawwe gevra nie."

"Kabouters het goeie rede om nie van towenaars te hou nie, Ron," sê Hermione. "Hulle is in die verlede baie wreed behandel."

"Maar kabouters is partykeer ook nie juis donsige klein goedjies nie," sê Ron. "Hulle het baie van ons al doodgemaak. Hulle het ook vuil baklei."

"Maar om met Griphook te stry oor wie se ras meer onderduims en gewelddadig is, gaan hom nie sover kry om ons te help nie, of hoe?"

Daar is 'n stilte terwyl hulle probeer dink aan 'n manier om die probleem te omseil. Harry kyk by die venster uit na Dobby se graf. Luna rangskik seelaventel in 'n konfytflessie langs die klip wat as grafsteen dien.

"Oukei," sê Ron en Harry draai terug en kyk na hom, "wat hiervan? Ons sê vir Griphook ons het die swaard nodig tot ons by die kluis inkom, en dan kan hy dit kry. Daar's mos 'n vervalste een daar, nè? Dan ruil ons hulle om en gee die vals een vir hom."

"Ron, hy sal beter as ons weet wat die verskil is!" sê Hermione. "Hy's die enigste een wat besef het die twee is omgeruil!"

"Ja, maar ons kan spore maak voor hy besef –"

Hy krimp ineen onder Hermione se blik.

"Dit," sê sy sag, "is laag en gemeen. Vra sy hulp en bedrieg hom dan? En jy wonder nog hoekom kabouters nie van towenaars hou nie, Ron?"

Ron se ore raak rooi.

"Oukei, oukei! Dis al waaraan ek kon dink! Wat is jou oplossing dan?"

"Ons moet vir hom iets anders aanbied, iets net so kosbaars."

"Briljant. Ek sal een van ons ander antieke, kaboutergemaakte swaarde gaan haal, dan kan jy dit in geskenkpapier toedraai."

Stilte daal weer oor hulle neer. Harry is seker die kabouter sal niks anders as die swaard aanvaar nie, selfs al het hulle iets net so

kosbaars gehad om vir hom aan te bied. Maar die swaard is en bly hulle enigste en onontbeerlike wapen teen die Horcruxe.

Hy maak sy oë vir 'n oomblik of twee toe en luister na die see se geruis. Die idee dat Gryffindor die swaard dalk gesteel het, is vir hom onaangenaam; hy was nog altyd trots om 'n Gryffindor te wees; Gryffindor was 'n kampvegter vir Moggelgeborenes, die towenaar wat gebots het met die suiwerbloed-behepte Slytherin . . .

"Miskien lieg hy," sê Harry en maak sy oë weer oop. "Griphook. Miskien het Gryffindor nie die swaard gevat nie. Hoe weet ons die kabouter se weergawe van die geskiedenis is reg?"

"Maak dit 'n verskil?" vra Hermione.

"Dit verander hoe ek daaroor voel," sê Harry.

Hy haal diep asem.

"Ons gaan vir hom sê hy kan die swaard kry nadat hy ons gehelp het om by daai kluis in te kom – maar ons maak net seker ons sê nie vir hom presies *wanneer* hy dit kan kry nie."

'n Glimlag sprei stadig oor Ron se gesig. Hermione lyk egter ontstuts.

"Harry, ons kan nie –"

"Hy kan dit kry," gaan Harry aan, "ná ons dit op al die Horcruxe gebruik het. Ek sal seker maak hy kry dit dan. Ek sal woord hou."

"Maar dit kan jare neem!" sê Hermione.

"Ek weet dit, maar *hy* hoef nie. Ek sal nie jok nie . . . nie regtig nie."

Harry beantwoord haar blik met 'n mengsel van uitdaging en skaamte. Hy onthou die woorde wat oor die ingang na Nurmengard gegraveer is: *Vir Almal se Beswil*. Hy stoot die gedagte weg. Watter keuse het hulle?

"Ek hou nie daarvan nie," sê Hermione.

"Ek ook nie juis nie," erken Harry.

"Wel, ek dink dis geniaal," sê Ron en staan weer op. "Kom ons gaan sê vir hom."

Terug in die kleinste kamer maak Harry die aanbod en bewoord dit versigtig sodat hy nie 'n definitiewe tyd spesifiseer wanneer die swaard oorhandig sal word nie. Hermione kyk fronsend na die vloer terwyl hy praat; hy is geïrriteerd met haar, bang sy gaan dalk alles uitblaker. Maar Griphook het vir niemand behalwe Harry oë nie.

"Ek het jou woord, Harry Potter, dat jy Gryffindor se swaard vir my sal gee as ek jou help?"

"Ja," sê Harry.

"Nou kom ons skud daarop," sê die kabouter en hou sy hand uit.

Harry vat dit en hulle skud blad. Hy wonder of daardie swart oë

enige bedenkinge in syne sien. Dan los Griphook hom, klap sy hande saam en sê: "So. Ons kan begin!"

Dit is soos om weer van voor af te beplan om by die Ministerie in te breek. Hulle spreek af om in die kleinste slaapkamer te werk en dit word op Griphook se aandrang halfdonker gehou.

"Ek was nog net een keer in die Lestranges se kluis," vertel Griphook vir hulle, "die keer toe ek aangesê is om die vervalste swaard daar te gaan wegsit. Dit is een van die heel oudste kluiskamers. Die oudste towerfamilies berg hulle skatte op die diepste vlakke waar die kluise die grootste is en die beste beskerm word . . ."

Hulle onttrek hulle vir ure op 'n keer in die klein, beknopte kamertjie. Die dae rek stadig uit tot weke. Een probleem ná die ander moet oorkom word, en een van die grootstes is dat hulle voorraad Polisouspaljas drasties gesak het.

"Daar is eintlik net genoeg vir een van ons oor," sê Hermione terwyl sy die dik, modderige Towerdrankie skuins hou teen die lamplig.

"Dit sal genoeg wees," sê Harry, wat Griphook se handgetekende kaarte van die diepste gange bestudeer.

Die Skulphuisie se ander inwoners kan dit beswaarlik miskyk dat daar iets aan die gang is noudat Harry, Ron en Hermione net met etenstye hulle verskyning maak. Niemand vra vrae nie, hoewel Harry dikwels sien hoe Bill hulle aan tafel dophou, nadenkend, bekommerd.

Hoe meer tyd hulle saam deurbring, hoe meer besef Harry hy hou nie eintlik van die kabouter nie. Griphook is onverwags bloeddorstig, hy lag by die gedagte aan pyn in minderes en verlekker hom blykbaar in die moontlikheid dat hulle ander towenaars dalk sal moet seermaak om by die Lestranges se kluis uit te kom. Harry kan sien die ander twee deel sy afkeer, maar hulle bespreek dit nie: hulle het Griphook nodig.

Die kabouter eet baie teësinnig saam met die res van hulle. Selfs nadat sy bene gesond is, hou hy aan vra vir skinkborde kos in sy kamer, net soos die steeds verswakte Ollivander, totdat Bill (ná 'n kwaai uitbarsting van Fleur) boontoe gaan en vir hom sê hulle kan nie met die reëling voortgaan nie. Daarna sluit Griphook by hulle om die oorvol tafel aan, alhoewel hy weier om dieselfde kos te eet. Hy dring aan op hompe rou vleis, plantwortels en verskillende swamme.

Harry voel verantwoordelik: dit was per slot van rekening hy wat daarop aangedring het dat die kabouter in die Skulphuisie aanbly sodat hulle hom kan ondervra, en dit is sy skuld dat die hele

Weasley-gesin noodgedwonge moet wegkruip en dat Bill, Fred, George en meneer Weasley nie meer kan gaan werk nie.

"Ek is jammer," sê hy een stormagtige aand in April vir Fleur terwyl hy haar help om aandete voor te berei. "Ek het nooit bedoel dat julle by alles ingesleep moet word nie."

Sy het so pas 'n paar messe aan die werk gesit om biefstuk op te sny vir Griphook en Bill, wat sy vleis bloedig verkies sedert Greyback hom aangeval het. Terwyl die messe agter haar doenig is, versag haar ietwat geïrriteerde uitdrukking.

"'Arry, jy't my suster se lewe gered, ek 'et dit nie vergeet nie."

Dit is streng genome nie waar nie, maar Harry besluit om haar nie daaraan te herinner dat Gabrielle nooit regtig in gevaar verkeer het nie.

"In elk geval," gaan Fleur voort en mik met haar towerstaf na 'n pot sous wat onmiddellik op die stoof begin borrel, "meneer Ollivander gaan vanaand na Muriel se huis toe. Dit sal dinge makliker maak. Die kabouter," sy lyk effens nors toe sy hom noem, "kan ondertoe trek, en jy, Ron en Dean kan daardie kamer kry."

"Ons gee nie om om in die sitkamer te slaap nie," sê Harry, wat weet Griphook sal geaffronteerd wees as hy op die rusbank moet slaap; dit is noodsaaklik vir hulle planne om die kabouter gelukkig te hou. "Moet jou nie oor ons bekommer nie." En toe sy probeer protesteer, gaan hy voort: "Jy sal een van die dae van my, Ron en Hermione ook ontslae wees. Ons hoef nie baie langer hier te bly nie."

"Maar hoe bedoel jy?" vra sy fronsend, haar towerstaf gerig op 'n skottel wat nou in die lug hang. "Julle kan nie 'ier weggaan nie, julle is veilig 'ier!"

Sy lyk half soos mevrou Weasley toe sy dit sê en hy is bly die agterdeur gaan op daardie oomblik oop. Luna en Dean kom in, hulle hare nat van die reën en hulle arms vol dryfhout.

". . . en klein-klein oortjies," is Luna besig om te sê, "'n bietjie soos 'n seekoei s'n, sê Pappa, net pers en harig. En as jy hulle wil roep, moet jy neurie; hulle verkies 'n wals, nie iets vinnigs nie . . ."

Dean, wat ongemaklik lyk, haal sy skouers in die verbyloop vir Harry op en volg Luna na die eetsitkamer waar Ron en Hermione die tafel vir aandete dek. Harry benut die kans om van Fleur se vrae te ontsnap; hy gryp twee bekers pampoensap en volg hulle.

". . . en as jy ooit na ons huis toe kom, sal ek vir jou die horing wys. Pappa het vir my daarvan geskryf, maar ek het dit nog nie gesien nie, want die Doodseters het my uit die Hogwarts Express ontvoer en ek het toe nooit vir Kersfees by die huis uitgekom nie," sê Luna terwyl sy en Dean die vuur weer aanpak.

"Luna, ons het jou mos gesê," kom Hermione tussenbeide, "daardie horing het ontplof. Dit was 'n Plofhoring, nie 'n Frommelhoring Snorklap –"

"Nee, dit was definitief 'n Snorklaphoring," sê Luna bedaard. "Pappa het my vertel. Dit het teen hierdie tyd seker al weer reggekom; hulle maak hulleself gesond, weet jy."

Hermione skud haar kop en dek nog vurke toe Bill met meneer Ollivander verskyn; hy lei die ou man by die trap af. Die towerstafmaker lyk nog buitengewoon swak en hy klou aan Bill se arm vas terwyl laasgenoemde hom stut, 'n groot tas in sy ander hand.

"Ek gaan jou mis, meneer Ollivander," sê Luna en gaan na hom toe.

"En ek vir jou, my kind," sê Ollivander en klop haar op die skouer. "Jy was vir my 'n onbeskryflike vertroosting in daardie afgryslike plek."

"So, *au revoir*, meneer Ollivander," sê Fleur en soen hom op albei wange. "En ek wonder, sal jy vir my 'n guns doen en vir Bill se tant Muriel 'n pakkie van my gee? Ek 'et nog nie 'aar tiara teruggegee nie."

"Dit sal 'n eer wees," sê Ollivander met 'n buiginkie, "die heel minste wat ek kan doen in ruil vir julle groothartige gasvryheid."

Fleur haal 'n verslete fluweelkissie uit wat sy oopmaak en vir die towerstafmaker wys. Die tiara glinster en skitter in die lig van die lae lamp.

"Maanstene en diamante," sê Griphook, wat by die vertrek ingesluip het sonder dat Harry dit opgemerk het. "Deur kabouters gemaak, dink ek?"

"En deur towenaars betaal," sê Bill sag en die kabouter gee hom 'n kyk wat sowel slu as uitdagend is.

'n Sterk windvlaag ruk aan die kothuis se vensters toe Bill en Ollivander in die nag verdwyn. Die res van hulle druk om die tafel in; elmboog teen elmboog en met skaars genoeg ruimte om te beweeg, begin hulle eet. Die vuur knetter en kraak in die kaggel langs hulle. Harry kom agter Fleur speel net met haar kos; sy kyk elke paar minute na die venster, maar Bill is terug voor hulle klaar is met die voorgereg, sy lang hare gekoek deur die wind.

"Alles is doodreg," sê hy vir Fleur. "Ollivander het ingetrek, Ma en Pa sê hallo. Ginny stuur liefde vir julle almal. Fred en George dryf Muriel teen die mure uit; hulle bedryf nog steeds 'n Uilposbesteldiens uit haar agterkamer. Maar dit het haar opgebeur om haar tiara terug te kry. Sy sê sy't gedink ons het dit gesteel."

"A, sy's *charmante*, daai tante van jou," sê Fleur vies en swaai

haar towerstaf sodat die vuil borde opstyg en 'n stapel in die lug vorm. Sy gryp hulle en marsjeer by die vertrek uit.

"Pappa het 'n tiara gemaak," sê Luna skielik. "Wel, eintlik meer van 'n kroon."

Ron vang Harry se oog en grinnik; Harry weet hy dink aan die belaglike hooftooisel wat hulle gesien het toe hulle by Xenophilius was.

"Ja, hy probeer Raweklou se verlore kroon herskep. Hy dink hy het nou die meeste van die hoofelemente geïdentifiseer. Dit het 'n groot verskil gemaak toe hy die goggavlerke bysit –"

Daar is 'n harde klop aan die voordeur. Almal se koppe draai soontoe. Fleur kom uit die kombuis ingehardloop en lyk bang; Bill spring op met sy towerstaf op die deur gerig; Harry, Ron en Hermione doen dieselfde. Griphook glip stil onder die tafel in, uit die oog.

"Wie is dit?" roep Bill.

"Dit is ek, Remus John Lupin!" roep 'n stem bo die loeiende wind. Harry voel 'n tinteling van vrees; wat het gebeur? "Ek is 'n weerwolf, getroud met Nymphadora Tonks, en jy, die Skulphuisie se Geheimhouer, het vir my die adres gegee en gesê ek moet in 'n noodgeval hierheen kom!"

"Lupin," mompel Bill. Hy hardloop na die deur toe en pluk dit oop.

Lupin val oor die drumpel. Hy is wit in die gesig, in 'n reismantel toegewikkel, en sy gryserige hare is windverwaai. Hy kom regop, kyk in die vertrek rond, maak seker wie daar is en sê dan hard: "Dis 'n seun! Ons noem hom Ted, na Dora se pa!

Hermione gee 'n gilletjie.

"Wa–? Tonks – Tonks het die baba gehad?"

"Ja, ja, sy het die baba gehad!" skree Lupin. Daar is uitroepe van blydskap en sugte van verligting oral om die tafel: Hermione en Fleur gil: "Geluk!" en Ron sê: "Demmit, 'n baba!" asof hy nog nooit van so iets gehoor het nie.

"Ja – ja – dis 'n seun," sê Lupin weer. Hy lyk bedwelm deur sy eie geluk. Hy loop met lang treë om die tafel en omhels Harry; die voorval in Grimmauldplein se kelder kon net sowel nooit gebeur het nie.

"Sal jy sy peetpa wees?" vra hy en laat los Harry.

"E – ek?" stamel Harry.

"Ja, ja, natuurlik – Dora stem saam, daar's niemand beter nie –"

"Ek – ja – demmit –"

Harry voel oorweldig, verstom, verheug. Bill gaan haal haastig wyn en Fleur oorreed Lupin om 'n drankie saam met hulle te drink.

"Ek kan nie lank bly nie, ek moet teruggaan," sê Lupin en kyk stralend na almal: hy lyk jare jonger as wat Harry hom ooit gesien het. "Dankie, dankie, Bill."

Bill het gou almal se glase volgeskink; hulle staan op en lig dit hoog vir 'n heildronk.

"Op Teddy Remus Lupin," sê Lupin, "'n groot towenaar in wording!"

"Na wie lyk 'y?" vra Fleur.

"Ek dink hy lyk soos Dora, maar sy dink hy lyk soos ek. Nie veel hare nie. Dit het swart gelyk toe hy gebore is, maar ek sweer dit het in die uur sedertdien rooi geword. Teen die tyd dat ek terug is, gaan hy seker blond wees. Andromeda sê Tonks se hare het ook van kleur begin verander die dag toe sy gebore is." Hy drink sy glas leeg. "Og, nou goed dan, net nog een," voeg hy met 'n breë glimlag by vir Bill wat regstaan om dit weer vol te maak.

Die wind skud die kothuisie, die vuur skiet knetterend vonke en Bill maak spoedig nog 'n bottel wyn oop. Dit is asof Lupin se nuus hulle van hulself laat vergeet het, hulle tydelik uit hulle staat van beleg bevry het: tyding van 'n nuwe lewe is besielend. Net die kabouter lyk onaangeraak deur die skielike feestelike atmosfeer en ná 'n ruk sluip hy terug na die slaapkamer wat hy nou alleen bewoon. Harry dink hy is al een wat dit agterkom totdat hy sien hoe Bill se oë die kabouter met die trap op volg.

"Nee . . . nee . . . Ek moet regtig teruggaan," sê Lupin oplaas en wys nog 'n glas wyn van die hand. Hy staan op en draai sy reismantel om hom. "Tot siens, tot siens – ek sal probeer om oor 'n paar dae foto's te bring – hulle sal almal so bly wees om te hoor ek het julle gesien –"

Hy maak sy mantel vas en begin groet: hy omhels die vrouens en skud die mans se hande en dan durf hy die woeste nag weer aan, steeds stralend.

"Peetpa Harry!" sê Bill toe hulle saam kombuis toe loop om die tafel te help afdek. "Dis 'n groot eer! Geluk!"

Harry sit die leë glase wat hy dra neer, en Bill maak die deur agter hom toe om die opgewonde stemme van die ander, wat selfs in Lupin se afwesigheid nog aanhou feesvier, uit te sluit.

"Ek wil eintlik privaat met jou gesels, Harry. Dis nie maklik om 'n kans te kry met die huis wat so vol mense is nie."

Bill aarsel.

"Harry, jy beplan iets met Griphook."

Dit is 'n stelling, nie 'n vraag nie, en Harry probeer dit nie ontken nie. Hy kyk slegs na Bill en wag.

"Ek ken kabouters," sê Bill. "Ek het by Gringotts gewerk nadat ek weg is by Hogwarts. Sover vriendskap tussen towenaars en kabouters moontlik is, het ek kaboutervriende – ten minste, kabouters wat ek goed ken en van wie ek hou." Bill aarsel weer. "Harry, wat wil jy van Griphook hê, en wat het jy hom in ruil daarvoor belowe?"

"Ek kan jou nie sê nie," antwoord Harry. "Jammer, Bill."

Die kombuisdeur gaan agter hulle oop; Fleur probeer om nog leë glase in te bring.

"Wag," sê Bill vir haar. "Net 'n oomblik."

Sy retireer en hy maak die deur weer toe.

"Ek wil net vir jou sê," gaan Bill verder, "as jy die een of ander ooreenkoms met Griphook aangegaan het, en veral as daar 'n skat by daardie ooreenkoms betrokke is, moet jy baie, baie versigtig wees. Kabouters se begrip van eienaarskap, betaling en terugbetaling is nie dieselfde as mense s'n nie."

Harry voel 'n effense krieweling van ongemak, asof 'n klein slangetjie binne-in hom geroer het.

"Wat bedoel jy?" vra hy.

"Ons praat hier van 'n ander soort wese," sê Bill. "Die onderhandelinge tussen towenaars en kabouters is al eeue lank gespanne – maar jy sal dit weet uit *Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns*. Daar is aan albei kante gefouteer; ek sal nooit beweer ons towenaars was onskuldig nie. Daar is egter 'n opvatting onder sommige kabouters, en Gringotts s'n is veral geneig daartoe, dat towenaars nie vertrou kan word in sake rakende goud en skatte nie, dat hulle kabouters se eienaarskap nie respekteer nie."

"Ek respekteer –" begin Harry, maar Bill skud sy kop.

"Jy verstaan nie, Harry, niemand kan dit verstaan tensy hulle saam met kabouters gelewe het nie. Vir 'n kabouter is die regmatige en ware eienaar van enige voorwerp die maker, nie die koper nie. Alle kaboutergemaakte voorwerpe is wat kabouters betref regmatig hulle s'n."

"Maar as dit gekoop is –"

"– dan beskou hulle dit asof die een wat die geld betaal het, dit huur. Hulle het groot probleme met die geval waar kaboutergemaakte voorwerpe van towenaar na towenaar gaan. Jy't gesien hoe lyk Griphook se gesig toe hy die tiara sien. Hy keur dit af. Ek glo hy dink, nes die militantste van sy soort, dit moes ná die oorspronklike koper se dood aan die kabouters terugbesorg gewees het. Hulle beskou ons gewoonte om kaboutergemaakte voorwerpe te hou en hulle sonder verdere betaling van een towenaar na 'n ander te laat gaan, as niks minder as diefstal nie."

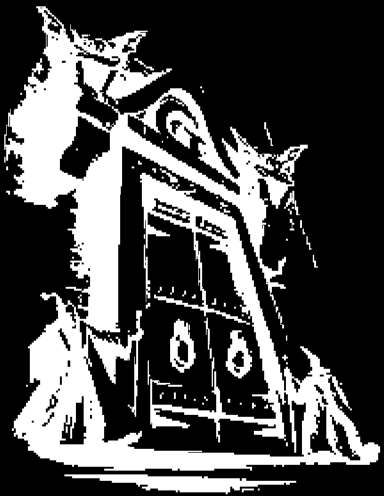
Harry kry 'n onheilspellende voorgevoel; hy wonder of Bill meer vermoed as wat hy te kenne gee.

"Al wat ek sê," gaan Bill voort en sit sy hand op die deur wat sitkamer toe lei, "is jy moet baie versigtig wees wanneer jy 'n kabouter iets belowe, Harry. Dit sal minder gevaarlik wees om by Gringotts in te breek as om 'n belofte aan 'n kabouter te verbreek."

"Reg," sê Harry terwyl Bill die deur oopmaak, "ja. Dankie. Ek sal dit in gedagte hou."

Terwyl hy Bill terug na die ander toe volg, kom daar 'n wrang gedagte by hom op, ongetwyfeld as gevolg van die wyn wat hy gedrink het. Hy is blykbaar goed op pad om net so 'n roekelose peetpa vir Teddy Lupin te word as wat Sirius vir hom was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



GRINGOTTS

Their plans were made, their preparations complete; in the smallest bedroom a single long, coarse black hair (plucked from the sweater Hermione had been wearing at Malfoy Manor) lay curled in a small glass phial on the mantelpiece.

"And you'll be using her actual wand," said Harry, nodding toward the walnut wand, "so I reckon you'll be pretty convincing."

Hermione looked frightened that the wand might sting or bite her as she picked it up.

"I hate this thing," she said in a low voice. "I really hate it. It feels all wrong, it doesn't work properly for me. . . . It's like a bit of *her*."

Harry could not help but remember how Hermione had dismissed

his loathing of the blackthorn wand, insisting that he was imagining things when it did not work as well as his own, telling him to simply practice. He chose not to repeat her own advice back to her, however; the eve of their attempted assault on Gringotts felt like the wrong moment to antagonize her.

"It'll probably help you get in character, though," said Ron. "Think what that wand's done!"

"But that's my point!" said Hermione. "This is the wand that tortured Neville's mum and dad, and who knows how many other people? This is the wand that killed Sirius!"

Harry had not thought of that: He looked down at the wand and was visited by a brutal urge to snap it, to slice it in half with Gryffindor's sword, which was propped against the wall beside him.

"I miss *my* wand," Hermione said miserably. "I wish Mr. Ollivander could have made me another one too."

Mr. Ollivander had sent Luna a new wand that morning. She was out on the back lawn at that moment, testing its capabilities in the late afternoon sun. Dean, who had lost his wand to the Snatchers, was watching rather gloomily.

Harry looked down at the hawthorn wand that had once belonged to Draco Malfoy. He had been surprised, but pleased, to discover that it worked for him at least as well as Hermione's had done. Remembering what Ollivander had told them of the secret workings of wands, Harry thought he knew what Hermione's problem was: She had not won the walnut wand's allegiance by taking it personally from Bellatrix.

The door of the bedroom opened and Griphook entered. Harry

reached instinctively for the hilt of the sword and drew it close to him, but regretted his action at once: He could tell that the goblin had noticed. Seeking to gloss over the sticky moment, he said, "We've just been checking the last-minute stuff, Griphook. We've told Bill and Fleur we're leaving tomorrow, and we've told them not to get up to see us off."

They had been firm on this point, because Hermione would need to transform into Bellatrix before they left, and the less that Bill and Fleur knew or suspected about what they were about to do, the better. They had also explained that they would not be returning. As they had lost Perkins's old tent on the night that the Snatchers caught them, Bill had lent them another one. It was now packed inside the beaded bag, which, Harry was impressed to learn, Hermione had protected from the Snatchers by the simple expedient of stuffing it down her sock.

Though he would miss Bill, Fleur, Luna, and Dean, not to mention the home comforts they had enjoyed over the last few weeks, Harry was looking forward to escaping the confinement of Shell Cottage. He was tired of trying to make sure that they were not overheard, tired of being shut in the tiny, dark bedroom. Most of all, he longed to be rid of Griphook. However, precisely how and when they were to part from the goblin without handing over Gryffindor's sword remained a question to which Harry had no answer. It had been impossible to decide how they were going to do it, because the goblin rarely left Harry, Ron, and Hermione alone together for more than five minutes at a time: "He could give my mother lessons," growled Ron, as the goblin's long fingers kept appearing around the edges of doors. With Bill's warning in mind, Harry could not help

suspecting that Griphook was on the watch for possible skulduggery. Hermione disapproved so heartily of the planned double-cross that Harry had given up attempting to pick her brains on how best to do it; Ron, on the rare occasions that they had been able to snatch a few Griphook-free moments, had come up with nothing better than "We'll just have to wing it, mate."

Harry slept badly that night. Lying awake in the early hours, he thought back to the way he had felt the night before they had infiltrated the Ministry of Magic and remembered a determination, almost an excitement. Now he was experiencing jolts of anxiety, nagging doubts: He could not shake off the fear that it was all going to go wrong. He kept telling himself that their plan was good, that Griphook knew what they were facing, that they were well-prepared for all the difficulties they were likely to encounter, yet still he felt uneasy. Once or twice he heard Ron stir and was sure that he too was awake, but they were sharing the sitting room with Dean, so Harry did not speak.

It was a relief when six o'clock arrived and they could slip out of their sleeping bags, dress in the semidarkness, then creep out into the garden, where they were to meet Hermione and Griphook. The dawn was chilly, but there was little wind now that it was May. Harry looked up at the stars still glimmering palely in the dark sky and listened to the sea washing backward and forward against the cliff: He was going to miss the sound.

Small green shoots were forcing their way up through the red earth of Dobby's grave now; in a year's time the mound would be covered in flowers. The white stone that bore the elf's name had already

acquired a weathered look. He realized now that they could hardly have laid Dobby to rest in a more beautiful place, but Harry ached with sadness to think of leaving him behind. Looking down on the grave, he wondered yet again how the elf had known where to come to rescue them. His fingers moved absentmindedly to the little pouch still strung around his neck, through which he could feel the jagged mirror fragment in which he had been sure he had seen Dumbledore's eye. Then the sound of a door opening made him look around.

Bellatrix Lestrange was striding across the lawn toward them, accompanied by Griphook. As she walked, she was tucking the small, beaded bag into the inside pocket of another set of the old robes they had taken from Grimmauld Place. Though Harry knew perfectly well that it was really Hermione, he could not suppress a shiver of loathing. She was taller than he was, her long black hair rippling down her back, her heavily lidded eyes disdainful as they rested upon him; but then she spoke, and he heard Hermione through Bellatrix's low voice.

"She tasted *disgusting*, worse than Gurdyroots! Okay, Ron, come here so I can do you. . . ."

"Right, but remember, I don't like the beard too long —"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, this isn't about looking handsome —"

"It's not that, it gets in the way! But I liked my nose a bit shorter, try and do it the way you did last time."

Hermione sighed and set to work, muttering under her breath as she transformed various aspects of Ron's appearance. He was to be given a completely fake identity, and they were trusting to the malevolent aura cast by Bellatrix to protect him. Meanwhile Harry

and Griphook were to be concealed under the Invisibility Cloak.

"There," said Hermione, "how does he look, Harry?"

It was just possible to discern Ron under his disguise, but only, Harry thought, because he knew him so well. Ron's hair was now long and wavy; he had a thick brown beard and mustache, no freckles, a short, broad nose, and heavy eyebrows.

"Well, he's not my type, but he'll do," said Harry. "Shall we go, then?"

All three of them glanced back at Shell Cottage, lying dark and silent under the fading stars, then turned and began to walk toward the point, just beyond the boundary wall, where the Fidelius Charm stopped working and they would be able to Disapparate. Once past the gate, Griphook spoke.

"I should climb up now, Harry Potter, I think?"

Harry bent down and the goblin clambered onto his back, his hands linked in front of Harry's throat. He was not heavy, but Harry disliked the feeling of the goblin and the surprising strength with which he clung on. Hermione pulled the Invisibility Cloak out of the beaded bag and threw it over them both.

"Perfect," she said, bending down to check Harry's feet. "I can't see a thing. Let's go."

Harry turned on the spot, with Griphook on his shoulders, concentrating with all his might on the Leaky Cauldron, the inn that was the entrance to Diagon Alley. The goblin clung even tighter as they moved into the compressing darkness, and seconds later Harry's feet found pavement and he opened his eyes on Charing Cross Road. Muggles bustled past wearing the hangdog expressions of early

morning, quite unconscious of the little inn's existence.

The bar of the Leaky Cauldron was nearly deserted. Tom, the stooped and toothless landlord, was polishing glasses behind the bar counter; a couple of warlocks having a muttered conversation in the far corner glanced at Hermione and drew back into the shadows.

"Madam Lestrange," murmured Tom, and as Hermione passed he inclined his head subserviently.

"Good morning," said Hermione, and as Harry crept past, still carrying Griphook piggyback under the Cloak, he saw Tom look surprised.

"Too polite," Harry whispered in Hermione's ear as they passed out of the inn into the tiny backyard. "You need to treat people like they're scum!"

"Okay, okay!"

Hermione drew out Bellatrix's wand and tapped a brick in the nondescript wall in front of them. At once the bricks began to whirl and spin: A hole appeared in the middle of them, which grew wider and wider, finally forming an archway onto the narrow cobbled street that was Diagon Alley.

It was quiet, barely time for the shops to open, and there were hardly any shoppers abroad. The crooked, cobbled street was much altered now from the bustling place Harry had visited before his first term at Hogwarts so many years before. More shops than ever were boarded up, though several new establishments dedicated to the Dark Arts had been created since his last visit. Harry's own face glared down at him from posters plastered over many windows, always captioned with the words UNDESIRABLE NUMBER ONE.

A number of ragged people sat huddled in doorways. He heard them moaning to the few passersby, pleading for gold, insisting that they were really wizards. One man had a bloody bandage over his eye.

As they set off along the street, the beggars glimpsed Hermione. They seemed to melt away before her, drawing hoods over their faces and fleeing as fast as they could. Hermione looked after them curiously, until the man with the bloodied bandage came staggering right across her path.

"My children!" he bellowed, pointing at her. His voice was cracked, high-pitched; he sounded distraught. "Where are my children? What has he done with them? You know, *you know*!"

"I — I really —" stammered Hermione.

The man lunged at her, reaching for her throat: Then, with a bang and a burst of red light he was thrown backward onto the ground, unconscious. Ron stood there, his wand still outstretched and a look of shock visible behind his beard. Faces appeared at the windows on either side of the street, while a little knot of prosperous-looking passersby gathered their robes about them and broke into gentle trots, keen to vacate the scene.

Their entrance into Diagon Alley could hardly have been more conspicuous; for a moment Harry wondered whether it might not be better to leave now and try to think of a different plan. Before they could move or consult one another, however, they heard a cry from behind them.

"Why, Madam Lestrange!"

Harry whirled around and Griphook tightened his hold around

Harry's neck: A tall, thin wizard with a crown of bushy gray hair and a long, sharp nose was striding toward them.

"It's Travers," hissed the goblin into Harry's ear, but at that moment Harry could not think who Travers was. Hermione had drawn herself up to her fullest height and said with as much contempt as she could muster:

"And what do you want?"

Travers stopped in his tracks, clearly affronted.

"He's another Death Eater!" breathed Griphook, and Harry sidled sideways to repeat the information into Hermione's ear.

"I merely sought to greet you," said Travers coolly, "but if my presence is not welcome . . ."

Harry recognized his voice now; Travers was one of the Death Eaters who had been summoned to Xenophilius's house.

"No, no, not at all, Travers," said Hermione quickly, trying to cover up her mistake. "How are you?"

"Well, I confess I am surprised to see you out and about, Bellatrix."

"Really? Why?" asked Hermione.

"Well," Travers coughed, "I *heard* that the inhabitants of Malfoy Manor were confined to the house, after the . . . ah . . . *escape*."

Harry willed Hermione to keep her head. If this was true, and Bellatrix was not supposed to be out in public —

"The Dark Lord forgives those who have served him most faithfully in the past," said Hermione in a magnificent imitation of Bellatrix's most contemptuous manner. "Perhaps your credit is not as good with him as mine is, Travers."

Though the Death Eater looked offended, he also seemed less suspicious. He glanced down at the man Ron had just Stunned.

"How did it offend you?"

"It does not matter, it will not do so again," said Hermione coolly.

"Some of these wandless can be troublesome," said Travers. "While they do nothing but beg I have no objection, but one of them actually asked me to plead her case at the Ministry last week. *'I'm a witch, sir, I'm a witch, let me prove it to you!'*" he said in a squeaky impersonation. "As if I was going to give her my wand — but whose wand," said Travers curiously, "are you using at the moment, Bellatrix? I heard that your own was —"

"I have my wand here," said Hermione coldly, holding up Bellatrix's wand. "I don't know what rumors you have been listening to, Travers, but you seem sadly misinformed."

Travers seemed a little taken aback at that, and he turned instead to Ron.

"Who is your friend? I do not recognize him."

"This is Dragomir Despard," said Hermione; they had decided that a fictional foreigner was the safest cover for Ron to assume. "He speaks very little English, but he is in sympathy with the Dark Lord's aims. He has traveled here from Transylvania to see our new regime."

"Indeed? How do you do, Dragomir?"

"'Ow you?" said Ron, holding out his hand.

Travers extended two fingers and shook Ron's hand as though frightened of dirtying himself.

"So what brings you and your — ah — sympathetic friend to

Diagon Alley this early?" asked Travers.

"I need to visit Gringotts," said Hermione.

"Alas, I also," said Travers. "Gold, filthy gold! We cannot live without it, yet I confess I deplore the necessity of consorting with our long-fingered friends."

Harry felt Griphook's clasped hands tighten momentarily around his neck.

"Shall we?" said Travers, gesturing Hermione forward.

Hermione had no choice but to fall into step beside him and head along the crooked, cobbled street toward the place where the snowy-white Gringotts stood towering over the other little shops. Ron sloped along beside them, and Harry and Griphook followed.

A watchful Death Eater was the very last thing they needed, and the worst of it was, with Travers marching at what he believed to be Bellatrix's side, there was no means for Harry to communicate with Hermione or Ron. All too soon they arrived at the foot of the marble steps leading up to the great bronze doors. As Griphook had already warned them, the liveried goblins who usually flanked the entrance had been replaced by two wizards, both of whom were clutching long thin golden rods.

"Ah, Probity Probes," sighed Travers theatrically, "so crude — but effective!"

And he set off up the steps, nodding left and right to the wizards, who raised the golden rods and passed them up and down his body. The Probes, Harry knew, detected spells of concealment and hidden magical objects. Knowing that he had only seconds, Harry pointed Draco's wand at each of the guards in turn and murmured,

"Confundo" twice. Unnoticed by Travers, who was looking through the bronze doors at the inner hall, each of the guards gave a little start as the spells hit them.

Hermione's long black hair rippled behind her as she climbed the steps.

"One moment, madam," said the guard, raising his Probe.

"But you've just done that!" said Hermione in Bellatrix's commanding, arrogant voice. Travers looked around, eyebrows raised. The guard was confused. He stared down at the thin golden Probe and then at his companion, who said in a slightly dazed voice,

"Yeah, you've just checked them, Marius."

Hermione swept forward, Ron by her side, Harry and Griphook trotting invisibly behind them. Harry glanced back as they crossed the threshold: The wizards were both scratching their heads.

Two goblins stood before the inner doors, which were made of silver and which carried the poem warning of dire retribution to potential thieves. Harry looked up at it, and all of a sudden a knife-sharp memory came to him: standing on this very spot on the day that he had turned eleven, the most wonderful birthday of his life, and Hagrid standing beside him saying, *"Like I said, yeh'd be mad ter try an' rob it."* Gringotts had seemed a place of wonder that day, the enchanted repository of a trove of gold he had never known he possessed, and never for an instant could he have dreamed that he would return to steal. . . . But within seconds they were standing in the vast marble hall of the bank.

The long counter was manned by goblins sitting on high stools, serving the first customers of the day. Hermione, Ron, and Travers

headed toward an old goblin who was examining a thick gold coin through an eyeglass. Hermione allowed Travers to step ahead of her on the pretext of explaining features of the hall to Ron.

The goblin tossed the coin he was holding aside, said to nobody in particular, "Leprechaun," and then greeted Travers, who passed over a tiny golden key, which was examined and given back to him.

Hermione stepped forward.

"Madam Lestrange!" said the goblin, evidently startled. "Dear me! How — how may I help you today?"

"I wish to enter my vault," said Hermione.

The old goblin seemed to recoil a little. Harry glanced around. Not only was Travers hanging back, watching, but several other goblins had looked up from their work to stare at Hermione.

"You have . . . identification?" asked the goblin.

"Identification? I — I have never been asked for identification before!" said Hermione.

"They know!" whispered Griphook in Harry's ear. *"They must have been warned there might be an impostor!"*

"Your wand will do, madam," said the goblin. He held out a slightly trembling hand, and in a dreadful blast of realization Harry knew that the goblins of Gringotts were aware that Bellatrix's wand had been stolen.

"Act now, act now," whispered Griphook in Harry's ear, *"the Imperius Curse!"*

Harry raised the hawthorn wand beneath the cloak, pointed it at the old goblin, and whispered, for the first time in his life, *"Imperio!"*

A curious sensation shot down Harry's arm, a feeling of tingling

warmth that seemed to flow from his mind, down the sinews and veins connecting him to the wand and the curse it had just cast. The goblin took Bellatrix's wand, examined it closely, and then said, "Ah, you have had a new wand made, Madam Lestrange!"

"What?" said Hermione. "No, no, that's mine —"

"A new wand?" said Travers, approaching the counter again; still the goblins all around were watching. "But how could you have done, which wandmaker did you use?"

Harry acted without thinking: Pointing his wand at Travers, he muttered, *"Imperio!"* once more.

"Oh yes, I see," said Travers, looking down at Bellatrix's wand, "yes, very handsome. And is it working well? I always think wands require a little breaking in, don't you?"

Hermione looked utterly bewildered, but to Harry's enormous relief she accepted the bizarre turn of events without comment.

The old goblin behind the counter clapped his hands and a younger goblin approached.

"I shall need the Clankers," he told the goblin, who dashed away and returned a moment later with a leather bag that seemed to be full of jangling metal, which he handed to his senior. "Good, good! So, if you will follow me, Madam Lestrange," said the old goblin, hopping down off his stool and vanishing from sight, "I shall take you to your vault."

He appeared around the end of the counter, jogging happily toward them, the contents of the leather bag still jingling. Travers was now standing quite still with his mouth hanging wide open. Ron was drawing attention to this odd phenomenon by regarding Travers with

confusion.

"Wait — Bogrod!"

Another goblin came scurrying around the counter.

"We have instructions," he said with a bow to Hermione. "Forgive me, Madam, but there have been special orders regarding the vault of Lestrange."

He whispered urgently in Bogrod's ear, but the Imperiused goblin shook him off.

"I am aware of the instructions. Madam Lestrange wishes to visit her vault . . . Very old family . . . old clients . . . This way, please . . ."

And, still clanking, he hurried toward one of the many doors leading off the hall. Harry looked back at Travers, who was still rooted to the spot looking abnormally vacant, and made his decision: With a flick of his wand he made Travers come with them, walking meekly in their wake as they reached the door and passed into the rough stone passageway beyond, which was lit with flaming torches.

"We're in trouble; they suspect," said Harry as the door slammed behind them and he pulled off the Invisibility Cloak. Griphook jumped down from his shoulders; neither Travers nor Bogrod showed the slightest surprise at the sudden appearance of Harry Potter in their midst. "They're Imperiused," he added, in response to Hermione and Ron's confused queries about Travers and Bogrod, who were both now standing there looking blank. "I don't think I did it strongly enough, I don't know. . . ."

And another memory darted through his mind, of the real Bellatrix Lestrange shrieking at him when he had first tried to use an

Unforgivable Curse: "You need to *mean* them, Potter!"

"What do we do?" asked Ron. "Shall we get out now, while we can?"

"If we can," said Hermione, looking back toward the door into the main hall, beyond which who knew what was happening.

"We've got this far, I say we go on," said Harry.

"Good!" said Griphook. "So, we need Bogrod to control the cart; I no longer have the authority. But there will not be room for the wizard."

Harry pointed his wand at Travers.

"Imperio!"

The wizard turned and set off along the dark track at a smart pace.

"What are you making him do?"

"Hide," said Harry as he pointed his wand at Bogrod, who whistled to summon a little cart that came trundling along the tracks toward them out of the darkness. Harry was sure he could hear shouting behind them in the main hall as they all clambered into it, Bogrod in front with Griphook, Harry, Ron, and Hermione crammed together in the back.

With a jerk the cart moved off, gathering speed: They hurtled past Travers, who was wriggling into a crack in the wall, then the cart began twisting and turning through the labyrinthine passages, sloping downward all the time. Harry could not hear anything over the rattling of the cart on the tracks: His hair flew behind him as they swerved between stalactites, flying ever deeper into the earth, but he kept glancing back. They might as well have left enormous footprints behind them; the more he thought about it, the more foolish it seemed

to have disguised Hermione as Bellatrix, to have brought along Bellatrix's wand, when the Death Eaters knew who had stolen it —

They were deeper than Harry had ever penetrated within Gringotts; they took a hairpin bend at speed and saw ahead of them, with seconds to spare, a waterfall pounding over the track. Harry heard Griphook shout, "No!" but there was no braking: They zoomed through it. Water filled Harry's eyes and mouth: He could not see or breathe: Then, with an awful lurch, the cart flipped over and they were all thrown out of it. Harry heard the cart smash into pieces against the passage wall, heard Hermione shriek something, and felt himself glide back toward the ground as though weightless, landing painlessly on the rocky passage floor.

"C-Cushioning Charm," Hermione spluttered, as Ron pulled her to her feet, but to Harry's horror he saw that she was no longer Bellatrix; instead she stood there in overlarge robes, sopping wet and completely herself; Ron was red-haired and beardless again. They were realizing it as they looked at each other, feeling their own faces.

"The Thief's Downfall!" said Griphook, clambering to his feet and looking back at the deluge onto the tracks, which, Harry knew now, had been more than water. "It washes away all enchantment, all magical concealment! They know there are impostors in Gringotts, they have set off defenses against us!"

Harry saw Hermione checking that she still had the beaded bag, and hurriedly thrust his own hand under his jacket to make sure he had not lost the Invisibility Cloak. Then he turned to see Bogrod shaking his head in bewilderment: The Thief's Downfall seemed to have lifted the Imperius Curse.

“We need him,” said Griphook, “we cannot enter the vault without a Gringotts goblin. And we need the Clankers!”

“Imperio!” Harry said again; his voice echoed through the stone passage as he felt again the sense of heady control that flowed from brain to wand. Bogrod submitted once more to his will, his befuddled expression changing to one of polite indifference, as Ron hurried to pick up the leather bag of metal tools.

“Harry, I think I can hear people coming!” said Hermione, and she pointed Bellatrix’s wand at the waterfall and cried, *“Protego!”* They saw the Shield Charm break the flow of enchanted water as it flew up the passageway.

“Good thinking,” said Harry. “Lead the way, Griphook!”

“How are we going to get out again?” Ron asked as they hurried on foot into the darkness after the goblin, Bogrod panting in their wake like an old dog.

“Let’s worry about that when we have to,” said Harry. He was trying to listen: He thought he could hear something clanking and moving around nearby. “Griphook, how much farther?”

“Not far, Harry Potter, not far . . .”

And they turned a corner and saw the thing for which Harry had been prepared, but which still brought all of them to a halt.

A gigantic dragon was tethered to the ground in front of them, barring access to four or five of the deepest vaults in the place. The beast’s scales had turned pale and flaky during its long incarceration under the ground; its eyes were milkily pink; both rear legs bore heavy cuffs from which chains led to enormous pegs driven deep into the rocky floor. Its great spiked wings, folded close to its body,

would have filled the chamber if it spread them, and when it turned its ugly head toward them, it roared with a noise that made the rock tremble, opened its mouth, and spat a jet of fire that sent them running back up the passageway.

"It is partially blind," panted Griphook, "but even more savage for that. However, we have the means to control it. It has learned what to expect when the Clankers come. Give them to me."

Ron passed the bag to Griphook, and the goblin pulled out a number of small metal instruments that when shaken made a loud, ringing noise like miniature hammers on anvils. Griphook handed them out: Bogrod accepted his meekly.

"You know what to do," Griphook told Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "It will expect pain when it hears the noise: It will retreat, and Bogrod must place his palm upon the door of the vault."

They advanced around the corner again, shaking the Clankers, and the noise echoed off the rocky walls, grossly magnified, so that the inside of Harry's skull seemed to vibrate with the din. The dragon let out another hoarse roar, then retreated. Harry could see it trembling, and as they drew nearer he saw the scars made by vicious slashes across its face, and guessed that it had been taught to fear hot swords when it heard the sound of the Clankers.

"Make him press his hand to the door!" Griphook urged Harry, who turned his wand again upon Bogrod. The old goblin obeyed, pressing his palm to the wood, and the door of the vault melted away to reveal a cavelike opening crammed from floor to ceiling with golden coins and goblets, silver armor, the skins of strange creatures — some with long spines, others with drooping wings — potions in

jeweled flasks, and a skull still wearing a crown.

"Search, fast!" said Harry as they all hurried inside the vault.

He had described Hufflepuff's cup to Ron and Hermione, but if it was the other, unknown Horcrux that resided in this vault, he did not know what it looked like. He barely had time to glance around, however, before there was a muffled clunk from behind them: The door had reappeared, sealing them inside the vault, and they were plunged into total darkness.

"No matter, Bogrod will be able to release us!" said Griphook as Ron gave a shout of surprise. "Light your wands, can't you? And hurry, we have very little time!"

"Lumos!"

Harry shone his lit wand around the vault: Its beam fell upon glittering jewels; he saw the fake sword of Gryffindor lying on a high shelf amongst a jumble of chains. Ron and Hermione had lit their wands too, and were now examining the piles of objects surrounding them.

"Harry, could this be — ? Aargh!"

Hermione screamed in pain, and Harry turned his wand on her in time to see a jeweled goblet tumbling from her grip. But as it fell, it split, became a shower of goblets, so that a second later, with a great clatter, the floor was covered in identical cups rolling in every direction, the original impossible to discern amongst them.

"It burned me!" moaned Hermione, sucking her blistered fingers.

"They have added Gemino and Flagrante Curses!" said Griphook. "Everything you touch will burn and multiply, but the copies are worthless — and if you continue to handle the treasure, you will

eventually be crushed to death by the weight of expanding gold!"

"Okay, don't touch anything!" said Harry desperately, but even as he said it, Ron accidentally nudged one of the fallen goblets with his foot, and twenty more exploded into being while Ron hopped on the spot, part of his shoe burned away by contact with the hot metal.

"Stand still, don't move!" said Hermione, clutching at Ron.

"Just look around!" said Harry. "Remember, the cup's small and gold, it's got a badger engraved on it, two handles — otherwise see if you can spot Ravenclaw's symbol anywhere, the eagle —"

They directed their wands into every nook and crevice, turning cautiously on the spot. It was impossible not to brush up against anything; Harry sent a great cascade of fake Galleons onto the ground where they joined the goblets, and now there was scarcely room to place their feet, and the glowing gold blazed with heat, so that the vault felt like a furnace. Harry's wandlight passed over shields and goblin-made helmets set on shelves rising to the ceiling; higher and higher he raised the beam, until suddenly it found an object that made his heart skip and his hand tremble.

"It's there, it's up there!"

Ron and Hermione pointed their wands at it too, so that the little golden cup sparkled in a three-way spotlight: the cup that had belonged to Helga Hufflepuff, which had passed into the possession of Hepzibah Smith, from whom it had been stolen by Tom Riddle.

"And how the hell are we going to get up there without touching anything?" asked Ron.

"Accio Cup!" cried Hermione, who had evidently forgotten in her desperation what Griphook had told them during their planning

sessions.

"No use, no use!" snarled the goblin.

"Then what do we do?" said Harry, glaring at the goblin. "If you want the sword, Griphook, then you'll have to help us more than — wait! Can I touch stuff with the sword? Hermione, give it here!"

Hermione fumbled inside her robes, drew out the beaded bag, rummaged for a few seconds, then removed the shining sword. Harry seized it by its rubied hilt and touched the tip of the blade to a silver flagon nearby, which did not multiply.

"If I can just poke the sword through a handle — but how am I going to get up there?"

The shelf on which the cup reposed was out of reach for any of them, even Ron, who was tallest. The heat from the enchanted treasure rose in waves, and sweat ran down Harry's face and back as he struggled to think of a way up to the cup; and then he heard the dragon roar on the other side of the vault door, and the sound of clanking growing louder and louder.

They were truly trapped now: There was no way out except through the door, and a horde of goblins seemed to be approaching on the other side. Harry looked at Ron and Hermione and saw terror in their faces.

"Hermione," said Harry as the clanking grew louder, "I've got to get up there, we've got to get rid of it —"

She raised her wand, pointed it at Harry, and whispered, *"Levicorpus."*

Hoisted into the air by his ankle, Harry hit a suit of armor and replicas burst out of it like white-hot bodies, filling the cramped

space. With screams of pain Ron, Hermione, and the two goblins were knocked aside into other objects, which also began to replicate. Half buried in a rising tide of red-hot treasure, they struggled and yelled as Harry thrust the sword through the handle of Hufflepuff's cup, hooking it onto the blade.

"Impervius!" screeched Hermione in an attempt to protect herself, Ron, and the goblins from the burning metal.

Then the worst scream yet made Harry look down: Ron and Hermione were waist-deep in treasure, struggling to keep Bogrod from slipping beneath the rising tide, but Griphook had sunk out of sight and nothing but the tips of a few long fingers were left in view.

Harry seized Griphook's fingers and pulled. The blistered goblin emerged by degrees, howling.

"Liberacorpus!" yelled Harry, and with a crash he and Griphook landed on the surface of the swelling treasure, and the sword flew out of Harry's hand.

"Get it!" Harry yelled, fighting the pain of the hot metal on his skin, as Griphook clambered onto his shoulders again, determined to avoid the swelling mass of red-hot objects. "Where's the sword? It had the cup on it!"

The clanking on the other side of the door was growing deafening — it was too late —

"There!"

It was Griphook who had seen it and Griphook who lunged, and in that instant Harry knew that the goblin had never expected them to keep their word. One hand holding tightly to a fistful of Harry's hair, to make sure he did not fall into the heaving sea of burning gold,

Griphook seized the hilt of the sword and swung it high out of Harry's reach.

The tiny golden cup, skewered by the handle on the sword's blade, was flung into the air. The goblin still astride him, Harry dived and caught it, and although he could feel it scalding his flesh he did not relinquish it, even while countless Hufflepuff cups burst from his fist, raining down upon him as the entrance of the vault opened up again and he found himself sliding uncontrollably on an expanding avalanche of fiery gold and silver that bore him, Ron, and Hermione into the outer chamber.

Hardly aware of the pain from the burns covering his body, and still borne along on the swell of replicating treasure, Harry shoved the cup into his pocket and reached up to retrieve the sword, but Griphook was gone. Sliding from Harry's shoulders the moment he could, he had sprinted for cover amongst the surrounding goblins, brandishing the sword and crying, "Thieves! Thieves! Help! Thieves!" He vanished into the midst of the advancing crowd, all of whom were holding daggers and who accepted him without question.

Slipping on the hot metal, Harry struggled to his feet and knew that the only way out was through.

"Stupefy!" he bellowed, and Ron and Hermione joined in: Jets of red light flew into the crowd of goblins, and some toppled over, but others advanced, and Harry saw several wizard guards running around the corner.

The tethered dragon let out a roar, and a gush of flame flew over the goblins: The wizards fled, doubled-up, back the way they had come, and inspiration, or madness, came to Harry. Pointing his wand

at the thick cuffs chaining the beast to the floor, he yelled, *"Relashio!"*

The cuffs broke open with loud bangs.

"This way!" Harry yelled, and still shooting Stunning Spells at the advancing goblins, he sprinted toward the blind dragon.

"Harry — Harry — what are you doing?" cried Hermione.

"Get up, climb up, come on —"

The dragon had not realized that it was free: Harry's foot found the crook of its hind leg and he pulled himself up onto its back. The scales were hard as steel; it did not even seem to feel him. He stretched out an arm; Hermione hoisted herself up; Ron climbed on behind them, and a second later the dragon became aware that it was untethered.

With a roar it reared: Harry dug in his knees, clutching as tightly as he could to the jagged scales as the wings opened, knocking the shrieking goblins aside like skittles, and it soared into the air. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, flat on its back, scraped against the ceiling as it dived toward the passage opening, while the pursuing goblins hurled daggers that glanced off its flanks.

"We'll never get out, it's too big!" Hermione screamed, but the dragon opened its mouth and belched flame again, blasting the tunnel, whose floors and ceiling cracked and crumbled. By sheer force the dragon clawed and fought its way through. Harry's eyes were shut tight against the heat and dust: Deafened by the crashing of rock and the dragon's roars, he could only cling to its back, expecting to be shaken off at any moment; then he heard Hermione yelling, *"Defodio!"*

She was helping the dragon enlarge the passageway, carving out the ceiling as it struggled upward toward the fresher air, away from the shrieking and clanking goblins: Harry and Ron copied her, blasting the ceiling apart with more gouging spells. They passed the underground lake, and the great crawling, snarling beast seemed to sense freedom and space ahead of it, and behind them the passage was full of the dragon's thrashing, spiked tail, of great lumps of rock, gigantic fractured stalactites, and the clanking of the goblins seemed to be growing more muffled, while ahead, the dragon's fire kept their progress clear —

And then at last, by the combined force of their spells and the dragon's brute strength, they had blasted their way out of the passage into the marble hallway. Goblins and wizards shrieked and ran for cover, and finally the dragon had room to stretch its wings: Turning its horned head toward the cool outside air it could smell beyond the entrance, it took off, and with Harry, Ron, and Hermione still clinging to its back, it forced its way through the metal doors, leaving them buckled and hanging from their hinges, as it staggered into Diagon Alley and launched itself into the sky.

HOOFSTUK SES-EN-TWINTIG

Gringotts

Hulle planne is beraam, hulle voorbereidings afgehandel; in die kleinste slaapkamer lê daar 'n lang, growwe, swart haar (gepluk uit die trui wat Hermione by die Malfoys se herehuis gedra het) opgekrul in 'n klein glasflessie op die kaggelrak.

"En jy sal haar eie towerstaf gebruik," sê Harry en knik in die okkerneuttowerstaf se rigting, "so ek dink jy sal taamlik oortuigend wees."

Hermione lyk bang dat die towerstaf haar kan steek of byt as sy dit optel.

"Ek haat hierdie ding," sê sy in 'n lae stem. "Ek haat dit regtig. Dit voel heeltemal verkeerd, dit werk nie ordentlik vir my nie . . . Dis soos 'n stukkie van *haar*."

Harry kan nie help om te onthou hoe Hermione sy renons in die swartdoringtowerstaf verwerp het nie, hoe sy volgehou het dat hy hom dinge verbeel toe dit nie so goed soos syne gewerk het nie en vir hom gesê het hy moet net eenvoudig oefen. Maar hy besluit om haar nie dieselfde raad toe te slinger nie; die aand voor hulle aanslag op Gringotts voel na die verkeerde oomblik om haar die harnas in te jaag.

"Dit sal jou waarskynlik help om in haar karakter te klim," sê Ron. "Dink wat daai towerstaf al alles gedoen het!"

"Maar dis juis my punt!" sê Hermione. "Dis die towerstaf wat Neville se ma en pa gemartel het, en wie weet hoeveel ander mense? Dis die towerstaf wat Sirius doodgemaak het!"

Harry het nie daaraan gedink nie: hy kyk af na die towerstaf en kry 'n dierlike drang om dit te breek, om dit middeldeur te kap met Gryffindor se swaard wat teen die muur langs hom staangemaak is.

"Ek mis *my* towerstaf," sê Hermione mismoedig. "Ek wens meneer Ollivander kon vir my ook 'n ander een gemaak het."

Meneer Ollivander het daardie oggend vir Luna 'n nuwe towerstaf gestuur. Sy is op die oomblik buite op die agterste grasperk besig om in die laatmiddagson te kyk waartoe dit in staat is. Dean,

wie se towerstaf deur die Grypers afgeneem is, hou haar taamlik morbied dop.

Harry kyk af na die haagdoringtowerstaf wat eers aan Draco Malfoy behoort het. Hy was verras maar bly om te ontdek dit werk ten minste so goed soos Hermione s'n vir hom. Harry onthou wat Ollivander hulle vertel het van die geheime werking van towerstawwe en dink hy weet wat Hermione se probleem is: sy het nie die okkerneuttowerstaf se lojaliteit verwerf deur dit persoonlik by Bellatrix af te neem nie.

Die slaapkamerdeur gaan oop en Griphook kom in. Harry reik instinktief na die swaard se hef en trek dit nader aan hom, maar is dadelik jammer hy het dit gedoen: hy kan sien die kabouter het dit agtergekom. In 'n poging om die ongemaklike oomblik te verdoesel, sê hy: "Ons gaan net gou deur die laaste goed, Griphook. Ons het vir Bill en Fleur gesê ons waai môre, en ons het gesê hulle moenie opstaan om ons te groet nie."

Hulle was baie beslis hieroor, want Hermione sal in Bellatrix moet transformeer voor hulle vertrek, en hoe minder Bill en Fleur weet of vermoed van wat hulle môre gaan doen, hoe beter. Hulle het ook verduidelik dat hulle nie sal terugkom nie. Aangesien hulle Perkins se ou tent verloor het die nag dat die Grypers hulle gevang het, het Bill vir hulle 'n ander een geleen. Dit is nou weggepak in die kraletjiehandsak; Harry was beïndruk toe hy uitvind Hermione het dit teen die Grypers beskerm deur dit eenvoudig by haar sokkie in te druk.

Hoewel hy Bill, Fleur, Luna en Dean gaan mis, om nie van die huislike geriewe wat hulle die afgelope paar weke geniet het, te praat nie, sien Harry daarna uit om weg te kom van die Skulphuisie se beperkte ruimte. Hy is moeg daarvan om te probeer seker maak hulle word nie toevallig gehoor nie, moeg om in 'n piepklein, donker slaapkamertjie opgesluit te wees. Hy sien die meeste van alles daarna uit om van Griphook ontslae te wees. Maar presies hoe en wanneer hulle van die kabouter gaan afskeid neem sonder om Gryffindor se swaard vir hom te gee, bly 'n vraag waarop Harry nie 'n antwoord het nie. Dit was tot dusver onmoontlik om te besluit hoe hulle dit gaan doen, want die kabouter laat Harry, Ron en Hermione selde meer as vyf minute op 'n slag alleen saam. "Hy kan vir my ma 'n paar lesse leer," grom Ron as die kabouter se lang vingers vir die hoeveelste keer om die rand van 'n deur verskyn. Met Bill se waarskuwing in sy agterkop kan Harry nie help om te vermoed Griphook hou hulle dop om seker te maak hulle probeer hom nie kul nie. Hermione keur die beplande bedrog so heftig af dat Harry

ophou probeer het om by haar kers op te steek oor die beste manier om dit te doen; die min kere dat hulle dit reggekry het om 'n paar oomblikke sonder Griphook te wees, kon Ron met niks beters vorendag kom nie as: "Ons sal maar net moet improviseer, pel."

Harry slaap daardie nag sleg. Hy lê in die vroeë oggendure nog wakker en dink terug aan hoe hy gevoel het die nag voor hulle die Ministerie van Towerkuns geïnfiltreer het en onthou die vasberadenheid, amper opwinding. Nou ervaar hy oomblikke van angs, knaende twyfel: hy kan die vrees dat alles gaan skeefloop nie afskud nie. Hy sê aanhoudend vir homself hulle plan is goed uitgewerk, Griphook weet wat hulle in die gesig staar, hulle is deeglik voorberei vir al die struikelblokke wat mag opduik; nogtans voel hy onrustig. Een of twee keer hoor hy Ron roer en is seker hy is ook wakker, maar hulle deel die sitkamer met Dean, so Harry praat nie.

Dit is 'n verligting toe dit sesuur word en hulle uit hulle slaapsakke kan glip, in die halfdonker aantrek en dan uitsluip na die tuin, waar hulle Hermione en Griphook moet ontmoet. Die dagbreek is kouerig, maar daar is nou min wind, want dit is Meimaand. Harry kyk op na die sterre wat steeds flou in die donker lug flonker en luister na die see wat vorentoe en agtertoe teen die krans spoel: hy gaan daardie geluid mis.

Klein groen lote beur nou 'n pad oop deur die rooi aarde van Dobby se graf; oor 'n jaar sal die hopie grond met blomme oortrek wees. Die wit klip met die elf se naam op lyk klaar verweer. Hy besef nou hulle kon Dobby skaars op 'n mooier plek ter ruste gelê het, maar Harry kry 'n knop in die keel as hy dink hy moet hom hier agterlaat. Hy kyk af na die graf en wonder weer eens hoe die elf geweet het waar om hulle te kom red. Sy vingers beweeg ingedagte na die sakkie wat om sy nek hang en hy voel aan die skerp spieëlskerf waarin hy seker is hy Dumbledore se oog gesien het. Dan laat die geluid van 'n deur wat oopgaan hom omkyk.

Bellatrix Lestrange loop oor die grasperk na hulle toe, vergesel deur Griphook. Terwyl sy loop, druk sy die klein kraletjiehandsak in die binnesak van nog een van die ou klede wat hulle by Grimmauldplein gekry het. Al weet Harry voor sy siel dit is in werklikheid Hermione, kan hy nie 'n rilling van walging onderdruk nie. Sy is langer as hy, haar lang swart hare rimpel by haar rug af, haar oë met die swaar ooglede rus minagtend op hom; maar dan praat sy en hy hoor Hermione deur Bellatrix se lae stem.

"Sy het *walglik* gesmaak, erger as Goerdiewortels! Oukei, Ron, kom hier dat ek jou kan verander . . ."

"Reg, maar onthou, ek hou nie van die baard te lank nie –"

"Ag, om hemelswil, dit gaan nie daaroor om aantreklik te lyk nie –"

"Dis nie dit nie; dit is hinderlik! Maar ek het gehou van my neus effens korter, probeer dit soos laas doen."

Hermione sug en spring aan die werk; sy mompel binnensmonds terwyl sy verskillende aspekte van Ron se voorkoms transformeer. Hy moet 'n heeltemal vals identiteit kry en hulle maak staat op die boosaardigheid wat Bellatrix uitstraal om hom te beskerm. Harry en Griphook sal op hulle beurt onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel versteek wees.

"So," sê Hermione. "Hoe lyk hy, Harry?"

'n Mens kan Ron net-net onder sy vermomming herken, maar Harry dink dit is bloot omdat hy hom so goed ken. Ron se hare is nou lank en golwend; hy het 'n dik bruin baard en snor, geen sproete nie, 'n kort, breë neus en swaar wenkbroue.

"Wel, hy's nie my tipe nie, maar hy kan gaan," sê Harry. "So, sal ons waai?"

Hulle kyk terug na die Skulphuisie wat donker en stil onder die kwynende sterre staan, draai dan om en begin wegstap na die plek, net anderkant die grensmuur, waar die Fideliustowerspreuk nie meer van krag is nie en hulle sal kan Disappareer. Toe hulle by die hek uit is, praat Griphook.

"Ek dink ek moet nou opklim, Harry Potter, of hoe?"

Harry buk af; die kabouter klouter op sy rug en vou sy hande voor Harry se keel saam. Hy is nie swaar nie, maar Harry hou nie van die gevoel van die kabouter en die verbasende krag waarmee hy vasklou nie. Hermione haal die Onsigbaarheidsmantel uit die kraletjiehandsak en gooi dit oor hulle albei.

"Perfek," sê sy terwyl sy buk om te kyk of Harry se voete uitsteek. "Ek kan niks sien nie. Weg is ons."

Harry tol op een plek met Griphook op sy skouers en konsentreer met alle mag op die Stomende Pot, die herberg wat die ingang na Diagonaalstraat toe is. Die kabouter klou selfs stywer toe hulle die drukkende duisternis ingaan, en sekondes later voel Harry se voete 'n sypaadjie en hy maak sy oë oop en sien dit is Charing Cross-weg. Moggels loop haastig verby met vroegoggend se kop onderstebo uitdrukkings, totaal onbewus van die herberg se bestaan.

Die Stomende Pot se kroeg is amper verlate. Tom, die krom en tandelose herbergier, vryf glase blink agter die kroegtoonbank; 'n paar heksemeesters wat mompelend in die verste hoek sit en gesels, loer na Hermione en deins terug tot in die skaduwees.

"Madame Lestrange," prewel Tom en laat sak sy kop onderdanig toe Hermione verbyloop.

"Goeiemôre," sê Hermione, en terwyl Harry verbyglip met Griphook wat hy onder die Mantel abba, sien hy Tom lyk verbaas.

"Te vriendelik," fluister Harry in Hermione se oor toe hulle by die herberg uitstap na die klein agterplaas toe. "Jy moet mense behandel asof hulle vuilgoed is!"

"Oukei, oukei!"

Hermione trek Bellatrix se towerstaf uit en tik op 'n baksteen in die doodgewone muur voor hulle. Die bakstene begin dadelik draai en tol: 'n opening verskyn in die middel en word breër en breër tot dit uiteindelik 'n gewelfde poort vorm wat na die smal Diagonaalstraat lei.

Dit is stil, die winkels het skaars oopgemaak, en daar is kwalik enige klante op straat. Die kronkelende keisteenstraat lyk nou baie anders as die woelige plek wat Harry soveel jaar gelede voor sy eerste kwartaal by Hogwarts besoek het. Meer winkels as ooit is met planke toegespyker, hoewel daar verskeie nuwe plekke gewy aan die Donker Kunste oopgemaak het vandat Harry laas hier was. Harry se eie gesig staar terug na hom vanuit plakkate wat op baie vensters geplak is, almal met die woorde *Ongewenste Nommer Een* daarop.

'n Paar verslonste mense sit gehurk in deuropeninge. Hy hoor hulle kermend by verbygangers bedel vir goud terwyl hulle daarop aandring dat hulle eintlik towenaars is. Een man het 'n bebloede verband oor sy oog.

Toe hulle in die straat begin afloop, sien die bedelaars Hermione raak. Dit is asof hulle voor haar wegsmelt; hulle trek hulle mantelkappe oor hulle gesigte en vlug so vinnig moontlik. Hermione kyk hulle nuuskierig agterna totdat die man met die bebloede verband slingerend na haar toe beweeg.

"My kinders!" gil hy en wys na haar. Sy stem is gebroke en skril; hy klink buite homself. "Waar is my kinders? Wat het hy met hulle gedoen? Jy weet, *jy weet!*"

"Ek – nee, ek –" stamel Hermione.

Die man gryp na haar keel; dan word hy met 'n slag en 'n ontploffing van rooi lig agteroor op die grond neergegooi, bewusteloos. Ron staan daar, sy towerstaf steeds uitgestrek, skok sigbaar agter sy baard. Gesigte verskyn in vensters aan weerskante van die straat terwyl 'n klompie verbygangers wat welvarend lyk hulle klede bymekaarvat en op 'n drafstappie van die toneel af padgee.

Hulle aankoms in Diagonaalstraat kon beswaarlik meer opsigte-

lik gewees het; Harry wonder vir 'n oomblik of dit nie dalk beter sal wees om liewer nou pad te gee en aan 'n ander plan te probeer dink nie. Maar voor hulle kan beweeg of mekaar kan raadpleeg, hoor hulle iemand agter hulle uitroep.

"Ek glo dit nie! Madame Lestrange!"

Harry swaai om en Griphook hou stywer om sy nek vas: 'n lang, maer towenaar met 'n kroon van ruie grys hare en 'n lang, skerp neus kom na hulle toe aangestap.

"Dis Travers," sis die kabouter in Harry se oor, maar op die oomblik kan Harry nie dink wie Travers is nie. Hermione het haar tot haar volle lengte uitgerek en sê met soveel minagting as wat sy kan: "En wat wil jy hê?"

Travers steek in sy spore vas, duidelik gekrenk.

"*Hy's ook 'n Doodseter!*" fluister Griphook, en Harry skuifel sywaarts om die inligting in Hermione se oor te herhaal.

"Ek het net probeer groet," sê Travers kil, "maar as my teenwoordigheid onwelkom is . . ."

Harry herken nou sy stem: Travers is een van die Doodseters wat na Xenophilius se huis ontbied is.

"Nee, nee, glad nie, Travers," sê Hermione vinnig in 'n poging om haar fout reg te stel. "Hoe gaan dit?"

"Wel, ek moet erken ek is verbaas om jou hier te sien rondloop, Bellatrix."

"Regtig? Hoekom"" vra Hermione.

"Wel," Travers gee 'n hoesie, "ek *hoor* die inwoners van die Malfoy-woning is in huisarres ná die . . . e . . . *ontsnapping.*"

Harry probeer Hermione met sy gedagtes dwing om kop te hou. As dit waar is en Bellatrix is nie veronderstel om in die openbaar te verskyn nie –

"Die Donker Heer vergewe diegene wat hom in die verlede die getrouste gedien het," sê Hermione in 'n manjifieke nabootsing van Bellatrix se mees minagtende houding. "Miskien is jou aandele by hom nie so hoog soos myne nie, Travers."

Al lyk die Doodseter effens beledig, lyk hy nou ook minder agterdogtig. Hy kyk af na die man wat Ron nou net Bedwelm het.

"Wat het dit aan jou gedoen?"

"Dit maak nie saak nie, dit sal dit nie weer doen nie," sê Hermione koel.

"Party van hierdie Towerstafloses kan lastig wees," sê Travers. "Ek het geen beswaar daarteen as hulle net bedel nie, maar een van hulle het my laas week sowaar gevra om vir haar voorspraak by die Ministerie te gaan doen. *'Ek's 'n heks, meneer, ek's 'n heks, laat ek dit*

vir jou bewys!' " boots hy haar in 'n piepstem na. "Asof ek vir haar my towerstaf sou gee – maar wie se towerstaf," vra Travers nuuskierig, "gebruik jy op die oomblik, Bellatrix? Ek hoor joune is –"

"Ek het my towerstaf hier," sê Hermione kil en hou Bellatrix se towerstaf op. "Ek weet nie na watter skinderstories jy geluister het nie, Travers, maar jy het dit jammerlik mis."

Travers lyk effens oorbluf en draai dan na Ron.

"Wie is jou vriend? Ek herken hom nie."

"Dit is Dragomir Despard," sê Hermione; hulle het besluit dit sal die beste wees as Ron 'n fiktiewe buitelander se identiteit aanneem. "Hy praat bitter min van ons taal, maar hy is die Donker Heer se doelwitte simpatiek gesind. Hy het van Transsilvanië af hierheen gereis om ons nuwe regime in werking te sien."

"Werklik? Aangename kennis, Dragomir."

"Kennis," sê Ron en hou sy hand uit.

Travers steek twee vingers uit en skud Ron se hand asof hy bang is hy gaan homself vuil smeer.

"So wat bring jou en jou – e – simpatieke vriend so vroeg na Diagonaalstraat?" vra Travers.

"Ek gaan Gringotts besoek," sê Hermione.

"Helaas, ek ook," sê Travers. "Goud, smerige goud! Ons kan nie daarsonder lewe nie, nogtans betreur ek die onvermydelike omgang met ons langvingervriende."

Harry voel hoe Griphook se vasgeklemde hande 'n oomblik lank om sy nek verstyf.

"Sal ons?" sê Travers en wys vir Hermione vorentoe.

Hermione het nie 'n keuse nie; sy val langs hom in en loop met die kronkelende keisteenstraat af na die plek waar die sneeuwit Gringotts bo die ander klein winkeltjies uittroon. Ron loop langs hulle, en Harry en Griphook volg.

'n Waaksame Doodseter is die laaste ding wat hulle nodig het, en die ergste van alles is, met Travers aan Bellatrix se sy, kan Harry glad nie met Hermione of Ron kommunikeer nie. Hulle beland gans te gou aan die voet van die marmertrap wat na die groot bronsdeure toe lei. Soos Griphook hulle reeds gewaarsku het, is die kabouters in uniform wat gewoonlik aan weerskante van die ingang staan, vervang deur twee towenaars met lang, dun goue stawe.

"A, Soekstawe," sug Travers teatraal, "so kru – maar effektief!"

En hy gaan by die trap op terwyl hy na links en regs knik vir die towenaars wat die goue stawe lig en dit op en af teen sy lyf beweeg. Harry weet die Soekers kan Versteektowerspreuke en verborge towervoorwerpe opspoor. Hy besef hy het net 'n paar sekondes en rig

Draco se towerstaf beurtelings op elkeen van die wagte en prewel twee keer: "*Confundo*". Travers kyk deur die bronsdeure binnetoe en sien nie hoe die wagte effens ril toe die towerspreuke hulle tref nie.

Hermione se lang swart hare golf agter haar aan toe sy by die trap opgaan.

"Net 'n oomblik, mevrou," sê die wag en lig sy Soeker.

"Maar jy het dit so pas gedoen!" sê Hermione in Bellatrix se bevelende, arrogante stem. Travers kyk met geligte wenkbroue om. Die wag is verward. Hy kyk af na die dun goue Soeker en dan na sy makker, wat in 'n effens bedwelmde stem sê: "Ja, jy het hulle nou net deursoek, Marius."

Hermione swiep vorentoe met Ron aan haar sy; Harry en Griphook draf onsigbaar agter hulle aan. Harry kyk om toe hulle die drumpel oorsteek: albei die towenaars krap hulle koppe.

Twee kabouters staan voor die binneste deure wat van silwer gemaak is en waarop die gedig gegraveer is wat potensiële diewe teen 'n verskriklike vergelding waarsku. Harry kyk op daarna en skielik skiet 'n vlymskerp herinnering hom te binne: die dag toe hy elf geword het, die wonderlikste verjaardag van sy lewe, het hy op hierdie einste plek gestaan toe Hagrid langs hom sê: "*Ek sê weer, jy moet mal wees as jy hulle wil probeer beroof.*" Gringotts het daardie dag vir hom soos 'n wonderbaarlike plek gevoel: die betowerde bewaarplek van 'n skatkis van goud wat hy nooit besef het hy besit nie; hy sou nooit vir een oomblik kon droom hy sou eendag hierheen terugkom om iets te steel nie . . . Maar binne sekondes staan hulle in die bank se yslike marmersaal.

Die lang toonbank word beman deur kabouters wat op hoë stoeltjies sit en die eerste kliënte van die dag bedien. Hermione, Ron en Travers mik na 'n ou kabouter wat 'n dik goue muntstuk deur 'n oogglas bestudeer. Hermione laat Travers voor haar toonbank toe gaan onder die voorwendsel dat sy eers 'n paar van die saal se kenmerke aan Ron wil uitwys.

Die kabouter gooi die munt wat hy vashou eenkant neer en sê vir niemand spesifiek: "Dwerg" en groet dan vir Travers, wat vir hom 'n klein goue sleuteltjie gee wat hy bekyk en teruggee.

Hermione tree vorentoe.

"Madame Lestrange," sê die kabouter, duidelik verskrik. "My wêreld! Hoe – hoe kan ek u vandag help?"

"Ek wil by my kluis ingaan," sê Hermione.

Dit lyk of die ou kabouter effens terugdeins. Harry kyk om. Dit is nie net Travers wat talm en Hermione aankyk nie; verskeie kabouters kyk van hulle werk af op en staar haar aan.

"Het u . . . identifikasie?" vra die ou kabouter.

"Identifikasie? Ek – ek is nog nooit vantevore vir identifikasie gevra nie!" sê Hermione.

"Hulle weet!" fluister Griphook in Harry se oor. *"Iemand moet hulle gewaarsku het hier gaan dalk 'n bedrieër opdaag!"*

"U towerstaf sal voldoende wees, madame," sê die kabouter. Hy hou 'n hand wat liggies bewe uit en dit tref Harry soos 'n harde hou teen die voorkop: Gringotts se kabouters weet Bellatrix se towerstaf is gesteel.

"Doen iets, doen iets," fluister Griphook in Harry se oor. *"Die Imperiusvloek!*

Harry lig die haagdoringtowerstaf onder die Mantel, mik daarmee na die ou kabouter en fluister vir die eerste keer in sy lewe: *"Imperio!"*

'n Vreemde sensasie skiet by Harry se arm af, 'n gevoel van tintelende warmte vloei by sy brein uit, af met die senings en are langs wat hom verbind met die towerstaf en die vloek wat dit nou net afgevuur het. Die kabouter neem Bellatrix se towerstaf, ondersoek dit deeglik en sê dan: "A, u het vir u 'n nuwe towerstaf laat maak, madame Lestrange!"

"Wat?" sê Hermione ""Nee, nee, dis myne –

"'n Nuwe towerstaf?" sê Travers en beweeg terug na die toonbank terwyl die kabouters rondom hulle die toneel steeds gadeslaan. "Maar hoe kon jy? Watter towerstafmaker het jy gebruik?"

Harry tree op sonder om te dink: hy rig sy towerstaf op Travers en prewel weer eens: *"Imperio!"*

"O ja, ek sien," sê Travers terwyl hy na Bellatrix se towerstaf kyk. "Ja, baie mooi. En werk dit goed? Ek dink altyd 'n towerstaf moet eers 'n bietjie ingebreek word, dink jy nie?"

Hermione lyk totaal verwilderd, maar tot Harry se groot verligting aanvaar sy die eienaardige verloop van omstandighede sonder enige kommentaar.

Die ou kabouter agter die toonbank klap sy hande en 'n jonger kabouter verskyn.

"Ek gaan die Rinkels nodig hê," sê hy vir die kabouter wat hom haastig uit die voete maak en 'n oomblik later verskyn met 'n leersak wat klink of dit vol klingelende metaal is. Hy gee dit vir sy senior. "Mooi, mooi! Reg, volg my asseblief, madame Lestrange," sê die ou kabouter en wip van sy stoeltjie af en verdwyn uit die oog, "ek sal u na u kluis toe neem."

Hy verskyn om die hoek van die toonbank en draf vrolik nader terwyl die sak se inhoud steeds klingel. Travers staan nou roerloos

en sy mond hang wyd oop. Ron vestig die aandag op hierdie vreemde verskynsel deur Travers verward aan te kyk.

"Wag – Bogrod!"

Nog 'n kabouter kom om die toonbank aangeskarrel.

"Ons het instruksies," sê hy met 'n buiging na Hermione toe, "vergewe my, madame Lestrange, maar ons moet spesiale prosedures volg sover dit die Lestrange-kluis aangaan."

Hy fluister dringend iets in Bogrod se oor, maar die kabouter wat ge-Imperius is, skud hom af.

"Ek is bewus van die instruksies. Madame Lestrange wil haar kluis besoek . . . 'n Baie ou familie . . . ou kliënte . . . Hierlangs, asseblief . . ."

En steeds al rinkelend, haas hy hom na een van die vele deure wat by die saal uit lei. Harry kyk om na Travers wat op een plek vasgenael staan en abnormaal afwesig lyk, dan neem hy 'n besluit: met 'n swiep van sy towerstaf laat hy Travers saam met hulle kom. Die Doodseter stap gedwee agter hulle aan, tot by die deur na die ruwe klipgang wat deur brandende fakkels verlig word.

"Ons is in die moeilikheid; hulle vermoed iets," sê Harry toe die deur agter hulle toeklap en hy die Onsigbaarheidsmantel afhaal. Griphook spring van sy skouers af; nóg Travers nóg Bogrod toon die geringste teken van verbasing dat Harry Potter skielik in hulle midde verskyn het. "Hulle is ge-Imperius," antwoord hy in reaksie op Hermione en Ron se verwarde vrae oor Travers en Bogrod, wat nou uitdrukkingloos daar staan. "Ek dink nie ek het dit sterk genoeg gedoen nie, ek weet nie . . ."

En nog 'n herinnering skiet deur sy brein, van die regte Bellatrix Lestrange wat op hom gil toe hy die eerste keer 'n Onvergeeflike Vloek probeer uitspreek het: *"Jy moet dit* bedoel, *Potter!"*

"Wat gaan ons doen?" vra Ron. "Sal ons nou hier uitkom, terwyl ons nog kan?"

"As ons kan," sê Hermione en kyk terug na die deur wat na die hoofsaal toe lei; nugter weet wat nou daaragter gebeur.

"Ons het tot hier gekom, so ek sê ons gaan aan," sê Harry.

"Mooi!" sê Griphook. "So, ons het Bogrod nodig om die karretjie te bestuur; ek het nie meer volmag om dit te doen nie. Maar daar sal nie vir die towenaar plek wees nie."

Harry wys met sy towerstaf na Travers.

"Imperio!"

Die towenaar draai om en hardloop met die donker spoor af.

"Wat laat jy hom doen?"

"Wegkruip," sê Harry en wys met sy towerstaf na Bogrod. Die

kabouter ontbied fluitend 'n karretjie wat uit die donker met die spoor langs na hulle toe aangekruie kom. Harry is seker hy hoor 'n geskree agter hulle in die hoofsaal terwyl hulle daarin klouter: Bogrod voor, met Griphook, Harry, Ron en Hermione saam agter ingedruk.

Die karretjie kom rukkend in beweging en tel spoed op. Hulle kletter verby Travers, wat hom by 'n kraak in die muur inwurm, dan begin die karretjie deur die doolhof van gange kronkel en draai, al dieper ondertoe. Harry kan niks bo die karretjie se geratel op die spore hoor nie: sy hare waai agtertoe terwyl hulle tussen stalaktiete deur swenk, al dieper die aarde in spoed, maar hy bly omkyk. Hulle kon net sowel enorme voetspore agter hulle gelos het; hoe meer hy daaroor dink, hoe dwaser voel dit vir hom dat hulle Hermione as Bellatrix vermom het en Bellatrix se towerstaf saamgebring het terwyl die Doodseters weet wie dit gesteel het –

Hulle is dieper as wat Harry al ooit in Gringotts was; hulle jaag om 'n haarnaalddraai en sien voor hulle, net sekondes ver, 'n waterval wat op die spoor neerstort. Harry hoor Griphook gil: "Nee!" maar dit is onmoontlik om rem te trap: hulle zoem daardeur. Harry se oë en mond is vol water; hy kan nie sien of asemhaal nie. Dan slaan die karretjie skielik met 'n slag om en hulle word almal uitgeslinger. Harry hoor hoe die karretjie teen die gang se muur aan flarde spat, hoor Hermione iets skree en voel hoe hy na die grond toe terugsweef asof hy gewigloos is; hy beland pynloos op die rotsvloer.

"K – Kussingtowerspreuk," stotter Hermione terwyl Ron haar op die been help. Maar tot Harry se afgryse sien hy sy is nie meer Bellatrix nie. Sy staan nou hier in 'n oorgroot kleed, papnat en heeltemal haarself; Ron het weer rooi hare en is baardloos. Die twee besef dit terwyl hulle na mekaar kyk en aan hulle eie gesigte voel.

"Die Dief se Ondergang!" sê Griphook. Hy sukkel orent en kyk terug na die stortvloed op die spoor, wat Harry nou besef meer as net water is. "Dit was alle towerspreuke weg, alle towergeheimhouding! Hulle weet daar is bedrieërs in Gringotts, hulle het verdedigingsmiddele teen ons in werking gestel!"

Harry sien Hermione kyk of sy nog die kraletjiehandsak het en steek sy hand vinnig onder sy baadjie in om seker te maak hy het nie die Onsigbaarheidsmantel verloor nie. Dan draai hy skuins en sien hoe Bogrod sy kop verbysterd skud: die Dief se Ondergang het die Imperiusvloek blykbaar tot niet gemaak.

"Ons het hom nodig," sê Griphook. "Ons kan nie sonder een van Gringotts se kabouters by die kluis inkom nie. En ons het die Rinkels nodig!"

"*Imperio!*" sê Harry weer. Sy stem eggo deur die klipgang en hy voel weer die gevoel van lighoofdige beheer wat van sy brein na sy towerstaf vloei. Bogrod onderwerp hom weer eens aan sy wil; sy verwarde uitdrukking verander na een van beleefde onverskilligheid terwyl Ron die leersak met metaalgereedskap opraap.

"Harry, ek dink ek hoor mense aankom!" sê Hermione. Sy mik met Bellatrix se towerstaf na die waterval en roep: "*Protego!*" Hulle sien hoe die Skildspreuk die betowerde water se vloei stop soos dit in die gang opskiet.

"Slim van jou," sê Harry. "Stap jy voor, Griphook!"

"Hoe gaan ons weer uitkom?" vra Ron terwyl hulle haastig in die donker agter die kabouter aanloop, met Bogrod wat hygend soos 'n ou hond agternawaggel.

"Kom ons bekommer ons daaroor wanneer ons moet," sê Harry. Hy probeer luister: hy verbeel hom hy kan iets naby hulle hoor klingel en beweeg. "Hoeveel verder nog, Griphook?"

"Nie ver nie, Harry Potter, nie ver nie . . ."

Hulle kom om 'n hoek en sien die ding waarop Harry voorbereid was, maar wat hulle almal tot stilstand bring.

'n Reusagtige draak is aan die grond voor hulle vasgemaak en versper die toegang tot vier of vyf van die bank se diepste kluise. Die dierasie word al so lank onder die grond gevange gehou dat sy skubbe bleek en skilferig is; sy oë is melkerig pienk; om albei sy agterbene is swaar boeie waarvandaan daar kettings loop na enorme pale wat diep in die rotsvloer ingekap is. Sy groot pennetjievlerke, wat dig om sy lyf gevou is, sal die hele tonnelkamer vul as hy hulle sprei. Hy draai sy lelike kop na hulle toe, brul met 'n geluid wat die rotsmure laat bewe, maak sy bek oop en spoeg 'n straal vuur wat hulle terug in die gang op laat hardloop.

"Hy's halfblind," hyg Griphook, "maar dit maak hom net nog wreedaardiger. Gelukkig het ons iets om hom mee te beheer. Hy het geleer wat om te verwag as die Rinkels kom. Gee hulle vir my."

Ron gee die sak vir Griphook en die kabouter haal 'n paar klein metaalinstrumente uit wat 'n harde, weerklinkende geluid soos miniatuurhamers op aambeelde maak as dit geskud word. Griphook deel hulle uit: Bogrod aanvaar syne ewe bedees.

"Julle weet wat om te doen," sê Griphook vir Harry, Ron en Hermione. "Hy verwag hy gaan seekry wanneer hy die geluid hoor: hy sal wyk, en dan moet Bogrod sy handpalm op die kluis se deur sit."

Hulle beweeg weer om die hoek terwyl hulle die Rinkels skud. Die geluid weerklink van die rotsmure af en word geweldig ver-

sterk, sodat dit vir Harry voel of die binnekant van sy skedel vibreer van die geraas. Die draak brul weer hees, dan retireer hy. Harry kan sien hoe hy bewe en toe hulle nader kom, sien hy die littekens van wreedaardige swaardhoue deur sy gesig en raai die draak is geleer om warm swaarde te vrees wanneer hy die geluid van die Rinkels hoor.

"Laat hy sy hand op die deur sit!" por Griphook aan en Harry draai sy towerstaf weer na Bogrod toe. Die ou kabouter gehoorsaam, druk sy palm teen die hout, en die kluis se deur smelt weg en openbaar 'n grotagtige opening wat van die vloer tot by die plafon volgepak is met goue munte en bekers, silwer wapenrusting, vreemde dierasies se pels, party met lang werwelkolomme, ander met hangende vlerke, towerdrankies in flesse versier met juwele, en 'n skedel wat 'n kroon dra.

"Soek, gou!" sê Harry terwyl hulle by die kluis instorm.

Hy het Hoesenproes se beker vir Ron en Hermione beskryf, maar as dit die ander, onbekende Horcrux is wat in hierdie kluis bewaar word, weet hy nie hoe dit lyk nie. Hy het egter skaars tyd om rond te kyk voor daar 'n dowwe klapgeluid agter hulle is: die deur het weer verskyn en verseël hulle nou in die kluis wat in totale donkerte gehul is.

"Toemaar, Bogrod sal ons hier kan uitkry!" sê Griphook toe Ron 'n verbaasde uitroep gee. "Maak lig met julle towerstawwe. En wikkel, ons het nie baie tyd nie!"

"Lumos!"

Harry skyn met sy towerstaflig in die kluis rond: die ligstraal val op glinsterende juwele, hy sien die vervalste Gryffindorswaard waar dit op 'n hoë rak tussen 'n warboel kettings lê. Ron en Hermione het hulle towerstawwe ook aangesit en ondersoek nou die stapels opgehoopte voorwerpe om hulle.

"Harry, kan dit dalk –? Au!"

Hermione gil van pyn en Harry draai sy towerstaf betyds na haar toe om te sien hoe 'n beker wat met juwele versier is uit haar greep val, maar soos dit val, breek dit oop en word 'n stortvloed bekers sodat die vloer 'n sekonde later bedek is met identiese bekers wat met 'n geweldige gekletter in alle rigtings rol en dit onmoontlik maak om uit te maak watter een van hulle die oorspronklike een is.

"Dit het my gebrand!" kreun Hermione en suig aan haar vingers wat vol blase is.

"Hulle het Vermenigvuldigings- en Heterdaadvloeke daarop gesit!" sê Griphook. "Alles waaraan 'n mens vat, sal jou brand en vermenigvuldig, maar die kopieë is waardeloos – en as jy aanhou om

aan die skatte te vat, sal die gewig van die goud wat al hoe meer word jou op die ou end dooddruk!"

"Oukei, moet aan niks raak nie!" sê Harry desperaat, maar terwyl hy nog praat, raak Ron se voet per ongeluk aan een van die bekers op die vloer, en nog twintig kom ploffend te voorskyn terwyl Ron op een plek rondtrippel, want die warm metaal het 'n deel van sy skoen weggebrand.

"Staan stil, moenie beweeg nie!" sê Hermione en klou aan Ron vas.

"Kyk net rond!" sê Harry. "Onthou, die beker is klein en van goud, daar is 'n dassie daarop gegraveer en dit het twee handvatsels – anders moet julle kyk of julle Raweklou se simbool iewers sien, die arend –"

Hulle mik met hulle towerstawwe na elke hoekie en gaatjie en draai versigtig op een plek rond. Dit is onmoontlik om nie teen iets te stamp nie; Harry laat stort 'n stroom vals Galjoene grond toe waar hulle by die bekers aansluit, en nou is daar skaars plek om hulle voete te sit. Die gloeiende goud straal soveel hitte uit dat die kluis soos 'n smeltoond voel. Harry se towerstaflig gly oor skilde en helms, wat deur kabouters gemaak is, op rakke wat tot teen die plafon strek. Hy lig die straal hoër en hoër en dan val dit skielik op 'n voorwerp wat sy hart 'n slag laat mis en sy hand laat bewe.

"Dis daar, dis daar bo!"

Ron en Hermione wys ook met hulle towerstawwe, sodat die klein goue bekertjie in 'n driedubbele kollig skitter: die bekertjie wat aan Helga Hoesenproes behoort het, wat in Hepzibah Smith se besit gekom het en toe deur Tom Riddle gesteel is.

"En hoe de hel gaan ons daar bo kom sonder om aan enigiets te raak?" vra Ron.

"Accio beker!" roep Hermione wat duidelik in haar desperaatheid vergeet het wat Griphook gedurende hulle beplanningsessies vir hulle gesê het.

"Dit help nie, dit help nie!" snou die kabouter haar toe.

"Nou wat moet ons dan doen?" vra Harry en gluur die kabouter aan. "As jy die swaard wil hê, Griphook, sal jy ons meer as dit moet help – wag! Kan ek met die swaard aan goed raak? Hermione, gee dit hier!"

Hermione tas in haar kleed rond, haal die kraletjiehandsak uit, krap daarin en haal die blink swaard uit. Harry gryp dit aan die robynhef en raak met die punt van die lem aan 'n silwer wynfles daar naby, wat nie vermenigvuldig nie.

"As ek die swaard net deur 'n handvatsel kan steek – maar hoe gaan ek daar bo kom?"

Die rak waarop die bekertjie staan, is buite hulle bereik, selfs Ron s'n, en hy is die langste. Die hitte van die betowerde skatte wel in golwe op en sweet loop by Harry se gesig en rug af terwyl hy sukkel om te dink aan 'n manier om die bekertjie by te kom. Dan hoor hy die draak aan die ander kant van die kluis se deur brul en rinkelgeluide wat harder en harder word.

Hulle is nou waarlik vasgekeer: die enigste pad uit is deur die deur, en 'n horde kabouters kom blykbaar aan die ander kant nader. Harry kyk na Ron en Hermione en sien vrees op hulle gesigte.

"Hermione," sê Harry terwyl die gerinkel harder word, "ek moet daar bo kom, ons moet van daai ding ontslae raak –"

Sy lig haar towerstaf, wys daarmee na Harry en fluister: *"Levicorpus."*

Harry word aan sy enkel opgehys; hy stamp teen 'n wapenrusting en replikas bars daaruit soos witwarm liggame en vul die beknopte ruimte. Met gille van pyn word Ron, Hermione en die twee kabouters opsy gestamp teen ander voorwerpe wat ook begin dupliseer. Halfpad begrawe in 'n stygende gety van rooiwarm skatte worstel en gil hulle terwyl Harry die swaard deur een van die Hoesenproes-beker se handvatsels steek en dit oor die lem haak.

"Impervius!" skree Hermione in 'n poging om haarself, Ron en die kabouters teen die brandende metaal te beskerm.

Dan laat die ergste gil van almal Harry afkyk: Ron en Hermione staan tot by hulle middellywe in die skatte en sukkel om te keer dat Bogrod onder die stygende gety ingly, maar Griphook het daarin weggesink en al wat nog van hom te sien is, is die punte van 'n paar lang vingers.

Harry gryp Griphook se vingers en trek. Die kabouter is oortrek met blase en kom geleidelik en al gillende uit.

"Liberacorpus!" skree Harry. Hy en Griphook beland met 'n harde slag bo-op die swellende skatte en die swaard vlieg uit Harry se hande.

"Kry dit!" gil Harry en veg teen die pyn van die warm metaal op sy vel terwyl Griphook weer op sy skouers klim, vasberade om die swellende massa rooiwarm voorwerpe te vermy. "Waar's die swaard? Die beker was daaraan gehaak!"

Die gerinkel aan die ander kant van die deur word oorverdowend – dit is te laat –

"Daar!"

Dit is Griphook wat dit sien en Griphook wat vorentoe skiet en op daardie oomblik weet Harry die kabouter het nooit verwag hulle sal woord hou nie. Met een hand wat 'n klos van Harry se hare

vasklou om seker te maak hy val nie in die verswelgende see van brandende goud nie, gryp Griphook die swaard se hef en swaai dit hoog buite Harry se bereik.

Die klein goue beker wat aan sy handvatsels oor die swaard se lem gehang het, word die lug in geskiet. Met die kabouter nog steeds wydsbeen op sy rug duik Harry en vang dit, en al kan hy voel hoe dit sy vleis brand, laat hy nie los nie, selfs nie toe tallose Hoesenproes-bekers uit sy vuis bars en op hom neerreën terwyl die kluis se ingang weer oopgaan en hy onbeheerbaar gly op 'n groeiende golf van brandende goud en silwer wat hom, Ron en Hermione na buite meesleur nie.

Skaars bewus van die pyn van die brandwonde regoor sy lyf, en terwyl hy steeds saamspoel met die vloedgolf dupliserende skatte, druk Harry die beker in sy sak en reik uit om die swaard terug te kry, maar Griphook is weg. Hy het die eerste oomblik wat hy kon van Harry se rug afgegly en gaan skuiling soek tussen die omringende kabouters.Nou swaai hy die swaard rond en gil: "Diewe! Diewe! Help! Diewe!" Hy verdwyn tussen die aankomende skare wat almal dolke vashou en hom sonder meer aanvaar.

Harry kom sukkelend regop, al glyende op die warm metaal, en weet die enigste pad uit is deur hulle.

"*Bedwelm!*" bulder hy, en Ron en Hermione span kragte saam met hom: strale rooi lig vlieg deur die massa kabouters en party val om, maar ander kom nader, en Harry sien 'n hele paar towenaarwagte om die hoek aangehardloop kom.

Die vasgekettingde draak brul en 'n vlaag vlamme vlieg oor die kabouters: die towenaars vlug vooroor gebuig terug met die gang waarlangs hulle gekom het, en dan skiet inspirasie, of waansin, Harry te binne. Hy mik met sy towerstaf na die dik boeie wat die dierasie aan die vloer vasketting en gil: "*Relashio!*"

Die boeie breek met harde slae oop.

"Hierlangs!" skree Harry, en terwyl hy nog steeds Bedwelmspreuke op die aankomende kabouters afvuur, hardloop hy na die blinde draak toe.

"Harry – Harry – wat doen jy" roep Hermione uit.

"Klim op, klim op, komaan!"

Die draak besef nog nie hy is vry nie: Harry trap met sy voet op die buiging van die dierasie se agterbeen en trek homself tot op sy rug. Die skubbe is so hard soos staal: die draak voel hom skynbaar nie eens nie. Hy strek 'n arm uit; Hermione hys haarself op; Ron klim agter hulle op, en 'n sekonde later word die draak daarvan bewus dat hy los is.

Hy rys met 'n gebrul regop; Harry knyp met sy knieë vas en klou so stewig as wat hy kan aan die getande skubbe terwyl die vlerke oopgaan en die gillende kabouters soos kegels omgooi. Die draak styg in die lug op. Harry, Ron en Hermione, lê plat op sy rug en skuur teen die plafon toe hy op die gangopening afduik terwyl kabouters hom agternasit en dolke na hom gooi wat van sy flanke af wegskram.

"Ons sal nooit hier uitkom nie, hy's te groot!" skree Hermione, maar die draak maak sy bek oop en spoeg weer vlamme wat die tonnel se vloer en plafon laat kraak en verkrummel. Die draak veg met louter krag sy pad deur die opening. Harry knyp sy oë styf toe teen die hitte en die stof. Die vallende rotse en die draak se gebrul verdoof hom; hy klou net aan sy rug vas en verwag om enige oomblik afgegooi te word; dan hoor hy hoe gil Hermione: *"Defodio!"*

Sy is besig om die draak te help om die gang groter te maak deur die plafon oop te kerf soos hy boontoe worstel, na die varser lug toe, weg van die gillende, rinkelende kabouters af. Harry en Ron volg haar voorbeeld en skiet die plafon uitmekaar met nog Uitholtowerspreuke. Hulle gaan verby die ondergrondse meer en dit is asof die groot, kruipende, snouende dierasie vryheid en ruimte voor hom aanvoel, en agter hulle is die gang vol van die draak se swiepende pennetjiestert, van groot stukke rots, reusagtige, gebreekte stalaktiete, en die kabouters se geklingel word al dowwer terwyl die draak se vuur hulle pad vorentoe oopspoeg –

En dan, uiteindelik, danksy die gesamentlike krag van hulle towerspreuke en die draak se brute sterkte, bars hulle by die gang uit en by die marmersaal in. Kabouters en towenaars gil en hardloop om skuiling te soek, en ten einde laaste het die draak genoeg ruimte om sy vlerke heeltemal oop te sprei: hy draai sy horingkop na die koel vars lug wat hy buite die ingang ruik en gee pad, met Harry, Ron en Hermione, wat aan sy rug vasklou. Hy forseer die metaaldeure oop en laat hulle gebuig en los aan hulle skarniere agter terwyl hy by Diagonaalstraat insteier en dan in die lug opstyg.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



THE FINAL HIDING PLACE

There was no means of steering; the dragon could not see where it was going, and Harry knew that if it turned sharply or rolled in midair they would find it impossible to cling onto its broad back. Nevertheless, as they climbed higher and higher, London unfurling below them like a gray-and-green map, Harry's overwhelming feeling was of gratitude for an escape that had seemed impossible. Crouching low over the beast's neck, he clung tight to the metallic scales, and the cool breeze was soothing on his burned and blistered skin, the dragon's wings beating the air like the sails of a windmill. Behind him, whether from delight or fear he could not tell, Ron kept swearing at the top of his voice, and Hermione seemed to be sobbing.

After five minutes or so, Harry lost some of his immediate dread that the dragon was going to throw them off, for it seemed intent on

nothing but getting as far away from its underground prison as possible; but the question of how and when they were to dismount remained rather frightening. He had no idea how long dragons could fly without landing, nor how this particular dragon, which could barely see, would locate a good place to put down. He glanced around constantly, imagining that he could feel his scar prickling. . . .

How long would it be before Voldemort knew that they had broken into the Lestranges' vault? How soon would the goblins of Gringotts notify Bellatrix? How quickly would they realize what had been taken? And then, when they discovered that the golden cup was missing? Voldemort would know, at last, that they were hunting Horcruxes. . . .

The dragon seemed to crave cooler and fresher air: It climbed steadily until they were flying through wisps of chilly cloud, and Harry could no longer make out the little colored dots which were cars pouring in and out of the capital. On and on they flew, over countryside parceled out in patches of green and brown, over roads and rivers winding through the landscape like strips of matte and glossy ribbon.

"What do you reckon it's looking for?" Ron yelled as they flew farther and farther north.

"No idea," Harry bellowed back. His hands were numb with cold but he did not dare attempt to shift his grip. He had been wondering for some time what they would do if they saw the coast sail beneath them, if the dragon headed for open sea; he was cold and numb, not to mention desperately hungry and thirsty. When, he wondered, had the beast itself last eaten? Surely it would need sustenance before long?

And what if, at that point, it realized it had three highly edible humans sitting on its back?

The sun slipped lower in the sky, which was turning indigo; and still the dragon flew, cities and towns gliding out of sight beneath them, its enormous shadow sliding over the earth like a great dark cloud. Every part of Harry ached with the effort of holding on to the dragon's back.

"Is it my imagination," shouted Ron after a considerable stretch of silence, "or are we losing height?"

Harry looked down and saw deep green mountains and lakes, coppery in the sunset. The landscape seemed to grow larger and more detailed as he squinted over the side of the dragon, and he wondered whether it had divined the presence of fresh water by the flashes of reflected sunlight.

Lower and lower the dragon flew, in great spiraling circles, honing in, it seemed, upon one of the smaller lakes.

"I say we jump when it gets low enough!" Harry called back to the others. "Straight into the water before it realizes we're here!"

They agreed, Hermione a little faintly, and now Harry could see the dragon's wide yellow underbelly rippling in the surface of the water.

"NOW!"

He slithered over the side of the dragon and plummeted feetfirst toward the surface of the lake; the drop was greater than he had estimated and he hit the water hard, plunging like a stone into a freezing, green, reed-filled world. He kicked toward the surface and emerged, panting, to see enormous ripples emanating in circles from

the places where Ron and Hermione had fallen. The dragon did not seem to have noticed anything: It was already fifty feet away, swooping low over the lake to scoop up water in its scarred snout. As Ron and Hermione emerged, spluttering and gasping, from the depths of the lake, the dragon flew on, its wings beating hard, and landed at last on a distant bank.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione struck out for the opposite shore. The lake did not seem to be deep: Soon it was more a question of fighting their way through reeds and mud than swimming, and at last they flopped, sodden, panting, and exhausted, onto slippery grass.

Hermione collapsed, coughing and shuddering. Though Harry could have happily lain down and slept, he staggered to his feet, drew out his wand, and started casting the usual protective spells around them.

When he had finished, he joined the others. It was the first time that he had seen them properly since escaping from the vault. Both had angry red burns all over their faces and arms, and their clothing was singed away in places. They were wincing as they dabbed essence of dittany onto their many injuries. Hermione handed Harry the bottle, then pulled out three bottles of pumpkin juice she had brought from Shell Cottage and clean, dry robes for all of them. They changed and then gulped down the juice.

"Well, on the upside," said Ron finally, who was sitting watching the skin on his hands regrow, "we got the Horcrux. On the downside —"

"— no sword," said Harry through gritted teeth, as he dripped dittany through the singed hole in his jeans onto the angry burn

beneath.

"No sword," repeated Ron. "That double-crossing little scab . . ."

Harry pulled the Horcrux from the pocket of the wet jacket he had just taken off and set it down on the grass in front of them. Glinting in the sun, it drew their eyes as they swigged their bottles of juice.

"At least we can't wear it this time, that'd look a bit weird hanging round our necks," said Ron, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

Hermione looked across the lake to the far bank, where the dragon was still drinking.

"What'll happen to it, do you think?" she asked. "Will it be all right?"

"You sound like Hagrid," said Ron. "It's a dragon, Hermione, it can look after itself. It's us we need to worry about."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't know how to break this to you," said Ron, "but I think they *might* have noticed we broke into Gringotts."

All three of them started to laugh, and once started, it was difficult to stop. Harry's ribs ached, he felt lightheaded with hunger, but he lay back on the grass beneath the reddening sky and laughed until his throat was raw.

"What are we going to do, though?" said Hermione finally, hiccuping herself back to seriousness. "He'll know, won't he? You-Know-Who will know we know about his Horcruxes!"

"Maybe they'll be too scared to tell him?" said Ron hopefully. "Maybe they'll cover up —"

The sky, the smell of lake water, the sound of Ron's voice were

extinguished: Pain cleaved Harry's head like a sword stroke. He was standing in a dimly lit room, and a semicircle of wizards faced him, and on the floor at his feet knelt a small, quaking figure.

"What did you say to me?" His voice was high and cold, but fury and fear burned inside him. The one thing he had dreaded — but it could not be true, he could not see how . . .

The goblin was trembling, unable to meet the red eyes high above his.

"Say it again!" murmured Voldemort. *"Say it again!"*

"M-my Lord," stammered the goblin, its black eyes wide with terror, "m-my Lord . . . we t-tried t-to st-stop them. . . . Im-impostors, my Lord . . . broke — broke into the — into the Lestranges' v-vault. . . ."

"Impostors? What impostors? I thought Gringotts had ways of revealing impostors? Who were they?"

"It was . . . it was . . . the P-Potter b-boy and t-two accomplices. . . ."

"And they took?" he said, his voice rising, a terrible fear gripping him. "Tell me! *What did they take?*"

"A . . . a s-small golden c-cup, m-my Lord . . ."

The scream of rage, of denial left him as if it were a stranger's: He was crazed, frenzied, it could not be true, it was impossible, nobody had ever known: How was it possible that the boy could have discovered his secret?

The Elder Wand slashed through the air and green light erupted through the room; the kneeling goblin rolled over, dead; the watching wizards scattered before him, terrified: Bellatrix and Lucius Malfoy

threw others behind them in their race for the door, and again and again his wand fell, and those who were left were slain, all of them, for bringing him this news, for hearing about the golden cup —

Alone amongst the dead he stormed up and down, and they passed before him in vision: his treasures, his safeguards, his anchors to immortality — the diary was destroyed and the cup was stolen: What if, *what if,* the boy knew about the others? Could he know, had he already acted, had he traced more of them? Was Dumbledore at the root of this? Dumbledore, who had always suspected him; Dumbledore, dead on his orders; Dumbledore, whose wand was his now, yet who reached out from the ignominy of death through the boy, *the boy* —

But surely if the boy had destroyed any of his Horcruxes, he, Lord Voldemort, would have known, would have felt it? He, the greatest wizard of them all; he, the most powerful; he, the killer of Dumbledore and of how many other worthless, nameless men: How could Lord Voldemort not have known, if he, himself, most important and precious, had been attacked, mutilated?

True, he had not felt it when the diary had been destroyed, but he had thought that was because he had no body to feel, being less than ghost . . . No, surely, the rest were safe . . . The other Horcruxes must be intact. . . .

But he must know, he must be sure . . . He paced the room, kicking aside the goblin's corpse as he passed, and the pictures blurred and burned in his boiling brain: the lake, the shack, and Hogwarts —

A modicum of calm cooled his rage now: How could the boy know that he had hidden the ring in the Gaunt shack? No one had ever

known him to be related to the Gaunts, he had hidden the connection, the killings had never been traced to him: The ring, surely, was safe.

And how could the boy, or anybody else, know about the cave or penetrate its protection? The idea of the locket being stolen was absurd. . . .

As for the school: He alone knew where in Hogwarts he had stowed the Horcrux, because he alone had plumbed the deepest secrets of that place. . . .

And there was still Nagini, who must remain close now, no longer sent to do his bidding, under his protection. . . .

But to be sure, to be utterly sure, he must return to each of his hiding places, he must redouble protection around each of his Horcruxes. . . . A job, like the quest for the Elder Wand, that he must undertake alone . . .

Which should he visit first, which was in most danger? An old unease flickered inside him. Dumbledore had known his middle name . . . Dumbledore might have made the connection with the Gaunts . . . Their abandoned home was, perhaps, the least secure of his hiding places, it was there that he would go first. . . .

The lake, surely impossible . . . though was there a slight possibility that Dumbledore might have known some of his past misdeeds, through the orphanage.

And Hogwarts . . . but he knew that his Horcrux there was safe; it would be impossible for Potter to enter Hogsmeade without detection, let alone the school. Nevertheless, it would be prudent to alert Snape to the fact that the boy might try to reenter the castle . . . To tell Snape why the boy might return would be foolish, of course; it

had been a grave mistake to trust Bellatrix and Malfoy: Didn't their stupidity and carelessness prove how unwise it was ever to trust?

He would visit the Gaunt shack first, then, and take Nagini with him: He would not be parted from the snake anymore . . . and he strode from the room, through the hall, and out into the dark garden where the fountain played; he called the snake in Parseltongue and it slithered out to join him like a long shadow. . . .

Harry's eyes flew open as he wrenched himself back to the present: He was lying on the bank of the lake in the setting sun, and Ron and Hermione were looking down at him. Judging by their worried looks, and by the continued pounding of his scar, his sudden excursion into Voldemort's mind had not passed unnoticed. He struggled up, shivering, vaguely surprised that he was still wet to his skin, and saw the cup lying innocently in the grass before him, and the lake, deep blue shot with gold in the failing sun.

"He knows." His own voice sounded strange and low after Voldemort's high screams. "He knows, and he's going to check where the others are, and the last one," he was already on his feet, "is at Hogwarts. I knew it. I *knew* it."

"What?"

Ron was gaping at him; Hermione sat up, looking worried.

"But what did you see? How do you know?"

"I saw him find out about the cup, I — I was in his head, he's" — Harry remembered the killings — "he's seriously angry, and scared too, he can't understand how we knew, and now he's going to check the others are safe, the ring first. He thinks the Hogwarts one is safest, because Snape's there, because it'll be so hard not to be seen

getting in, I think he'll check that one last, but he could still be there within hours —"

"Did you see where in Hogwarts it is?" asked Ron, now scrambling to his feet too.

"No, he was concentrating on warning Snape, he didn't think about exactly where it is —"

"Wait, *wait!*" cried Hermione as Ron caught up the Horcrux and Harry pulled out the Invisibility Cloak again. "We can't just *go*, we haven't got a plan, we need to —"

"We need to get going," said Harry firmly. He had been hoping to sleep, looking forward to getting into the new tent, but that was impossible now. "Can you imagine what he's going to do once he realizes the ring and the locket are gone? What if he moves the Hogwarts Horcrux, decides it isn't safe enough?"

"But how are we going to get in?"

"We'll go to Hogsmeade," said Harry, "and try to work something out once we see what the protection around the school's like. Get under the Cloak, Hermione, I want to stick together this time."

"But we don't really fit —"

"It'll be dark, no one's going to notice our feet."

The flapping of enormous wings echoed across the black water: The dragon had drunk its fill and risen into the air. They paused in their preparations to watch it climb higher and higher, now black against the rapidly darkening sky, until it vanished over a nearby mountain. Then Hermione walked forward and took her place between the other two. Harry pulled the Cloak down as far as it would go, and together they turned on the spot into the crushing

darkness.

— HOOFSTUK SEWE-EN-TWINTIG —

Die Laaste Wegsteekplek

Daar is nie 'n manier om die draak te stuur nie; hy kan nie sien waarheen hy gaan nie, en Harry weet as hy skerp swenk of in die lug omrol, sal hulle nie aan sy breë rug kan vasklou nie. Nogtans, terwyl hulle al hoër en hoër klim met Londen wat soos 'n grys en groen kaart onder hulle oopvou, kry Harry 'n oorweldigende gevoel van dankbaarheid vir 'n ontsnapping wat onmoontlik gelyk het. Hy buig laag oor die dierasie se nek en klou styf aan die metaalagtige skubbe vas. Die koel bries is strelend op sy verbrande vel wat vol blase is, en die draak se vlerke klap in die lug soos 'n windmeul se seile. Agter hom, hy kan nie uitmaak of dit van vreugde of vrees is nie, vloek Ron aanhoudend luidkeels en Hermione snik skynbaar.

Ná vyf minute of so kom Harry in 'n mate oor sy aanvanklike vrees dat die draak hulle gaan afgooi, want dit lyk of hy net daarop ingestel is om so ver moontlik van sy ondergrondse tronk af weg te kom, maar die vraag hoe en wanneer hulle moet afklim, bly nogal vreesaanjaend. Hy het nie 'n benul hoe lank drake kan vlieg sonder om te land nie, en ook nie hoe hierdie spesifieke draak, wat skaars kan sien, 'n goeie plek sal vind om te land nie. Hy kyk telkens om, want hy verbeel hom hy voel sy litteken prik . . .

Hoe lank gaan dit wees voor Voldemort weet hulle het by die Lestranges se kluis ingebreek? Hoe gou gaan Gringotts se kabouters Bellatrix in kennis stel? Hoe vinnig gaan hulle besef wat daar gebeur het? En dan, as hulle agterkom die goue beker is weg? Voldemort gaan uiteindelik nou uitvind hulle maak jag op die Horcruxe . . .

Dit lyk of die draak na koeler en varser lug smag: hy styg hoër op totdat hulle deur koue wolkslierte vlieg en Harry nie meer die klein gekleurde kolletjies kan sien van motors wat by die hoofstad in- en uitstroom nie. Hulle vlieg verder en verder, oor velde verdeel in lappies groen en bruin, oor paaie en riviere wat deur die landskap kronkel soos stroke mat- en glanslint.

"Waarna dink jy soek hy?" skree Ron terwyl hulle al hoe verder noord vlieg.

"G'n idee nie," bulder Harry. Sy hande is gevoelloos van die koue, maar hy waag dit nie om sy greep te probeer versit nie. Hy wonder nou al 'n rukkie wat hulle sal doen as hulle die kus onder hulle sien verbyseil en die draak oopsee toe mik. Hy is verkluim van die koue, om nie te praat van rasend honger en dors nie. Wanneer, wonder hy, het hierdie dierasie laas geëet? Hy sal tog sekerlik kort voor lank kos nodig hê? En wat as hy besef daar sit drie uiters eetbare mense op sy rug?

Die son sak laer af in die lug wat nou indigo word. Die draak vlieg steeds verder, en stede en dorpe gly onder hulle verby terwyl sy enorme skaduwee soos 'n groot, donker wolk oor die aarde skuif. Alles aan Harry pyn van die inspanning om aan die draak se rug vas te hou.

"Is dit my verbeelding," roep Ron ná 'n taamlike lang stilte, "of verloor ons hoogte?"

Harry kyk af en sien diepgroen berge en mere, koperagtig in die sonsondergang. Dit is of die landskap groter en meer gedetailleerd raak terwyl hy deur skrefiesoë oor die kant van die draak kyk en wonder of die dier uit die flikkering van geweerkaatste sonlig kan agterkom daar is vars water naby.

Die draak vlieg laer en laer, in groot spiraalsirkels, en mik af na een van die kleiner mere.

"Ek sê ons spring sodra hy laag genoeg is!" skree Harry vir die ander agter sy rug. "Reguit in die water voor hy besef ons is hier!"

Hulle stem saam, Hermione effens floutjies: en nou sien Harry hoe rimpel die draak se breë geel pens in die water se oppervlak.

"NOU!"

Hy gly by die draak se kant af en stort voete eerste af na die meer toe. Hy val verder as wat hy geskat het, tref die water hard en sink soos 'n klip in 'n vriesende groen wêreld vol riete. Hy skop tot hy weer by die oppervlak kom en kyk hygend na die enorme rimpelings wat uitkring om die plekke waar Ron en Hermione ingeval het. Dit lyk nie of die draak enigiets agtergekom het nie: hy is reeds 'n hele ent weg en swiep laag oor die meer om water op te skep in sy snoet wat vol littekens is. Terwyl Ron en Hermione al proesend en snakkend bo die oppervlak verskyn, vlieg die draak verder met vlerke wat hard klap en land uiteindelik op die verste oewer.

Harry, Ron en Hermione baan hulle weg na die oorkantste wal toe. Die meer is nie so diep nie: spoedig is dit meer 'n kwessie van 'n pad tussen die riete en modder oopbaklei as swem, en oplaas val hulle sopnat, hygend en pootuit op die gladde gras neer.

Hermione sak inmekaar, hoesend en bibberend. Al voel Harry

hy kan maklik net hier lê en slaap, kom hy wankelend op die been, haal sy towerstaf uit en begin die gewone beskermende paljasse om hulle oprig.

Toe hy klaar is, sluit hy by die ander aan. Dit is die eerste keer dat hy hulle ordentlik sien vandat hulle uit die kluis ontsnap het. Albei het kwaai rooi brandwonde op hulle gesigte en arms, en hulle klere is op plekke stukkend geskroei. Hulle krimp ineen van pyn terwyl hulle essekruidessens aan hulle seerplekke smeer. Hermione gee die botteltjie vir Harry, haal dan drie bottels pampoensap uit wat sy van die Skulphuisie af saamgebring het, asook skoon, droë klede vir almal. Hulle verklee en drink die sap gulsig.

"Wel, die goeie nuus is," sê Ron later terwyl hy sit en kyk hoe die vel op sy hande teruggroei, "ons het die Horcrux. Die slegte nuus is –"

"– geen swaard nie," sê Harry deur knersende tande terwyl hy essekruid deur die gat wat in sy jeans geskroei is, laat drup tot op die kwaai brandplek daaronder.

"Geen swaard nie," herhaal Ron. "Daai klein pes wat ons so verneuk het . . ."

Harry haal die Horcrux uit die sak van die nat baadjie wat hy uitgetrek het en sit dit op die gras voor hulle neer. Dit skitter in die son en hulle kan hul oë nie daarvan afhou terwyl hulle groot slukke uit hulle bottels sap neem nie.

"Ten minste kan ons dié een nie dra nie, dit sal 'n bietjie snaaks lyk as dit om 'n ou se nek hang," sê Ron en vee sy mond met die agterkant van sy hand af.

Hermione kyk oor die meer na die verste oewer waar die draak steeds water drink.

"Wat dink julle gaan met hom gebeur?" vra sy. "Sal hy oukei wees?"

"Jy klink nes Hagrid," sê Ron. "Dis 'n draak, Hermione, hy kan na homself kyk. Ons moet oor onsself bekommerd wees."

"Wat bedoel jy?"

"Wel, ek weet nie hoe om die nuus aan jou oor te dra nie," sê Ron, "maar ek dink hulle *mag* dalk agtergekom het ons het by Gringotts ingebreek."

Al drie begin te lag, en dit is moeilik om op te hou. Harry se ribbes pyn, hy voel lighoofdig van die honger, maar hy lê terug op die gras onder die lug wat rooi word en lag tot sy keel rou is.

"Maar wat gaan ons doen?" vra Hermione uiteindelik nadat sy haarself weer ernstig gehik het. "Hy sal weet, dan nie? Jy-Weet-Wie sal weet ons weet van sy Horcruxe!"

"Miskien sal hulle te bang wees om hom te vertel?" sê Ron hoopvol. "Miskien sal hulle dit wil toesmeer –"

Die lug, die reuk van die meer se water, die klank van Ron se stem word uitgedoof: pyn klief Harry se kop soos 'n swaard. Hy staan in 'n dofverligte vertrek met 'n halfsirkel towenaars voor hom en op die vloer aan sy voete kniel 'n klein, sidderende figuurtjie.

"Wat het jy vir my gesê?" Sy stem is hoog en koud, maar woede en vrees brand binne-in hom. Die een ding wat hy gevrees het – maar dit kan nie waar wees nie, hy kan nie sien hoe . . .

Die kabouter bewe en kan nie in die rooi oë hoog bokant hom kyk nie.

"Sê dit weer!" mompel Voldemort. *"Sê dit weer!"*

"M – my Heer," stamel die kabouter met sy swart oë wyd van angs, "m – my Heer . . . ons het p – probeer om hulle te st – stop . . . b – bedrieërs, my Heer . . . het ingebreek – ingebreek by die – by die Lestranges se k – kluis . . ."

"Bedrieërs? Watse bedrieërs? Ek dog Gringotts het maniere om bedrieërs te ontmasker? Wie was dit?"

"Dit was . . . dit was . . . die P – Potter-seun en t – twee medepligtiges . . ."

"En wat het hulle gevat?" vra hy en sy stem styg terwyl 'n verskriklike vrees hom beetpak. "Sê my! *Wat het hulle gevat?*"

"'n . . . 'n K – klein goue b – beker, m – my Heer . . ."

Die gil van woede, van ontkenning, verlaat hom asof dit 'n vreemdeling s'n is: hy is waansinnig, rasend, dit kan nie waar wees nie, dit is onmoontlik, niemand het ooit geweet nie: hoe is dit moontlik dat die seun van sy geheim kon uitvind?

Die Vlierstaf swiep deur die lug en groen lig ontplof in die vertrek. Die knielende kabouter rol om, dood, die towenaars wat toegekyk het, spat angsbevange uitmekaar voor sy woede. Bellatrix en Lucius Malfoy stamp ander uit die pad om eerste by die deur te kom, en sy towerstaf swaai keer op keer, en dié wat agterbly, sneuwel, almal van hulle, omdat hulle hierdie nuus aan hom oorgedra het, want hulle het van die goue beker gehoor . . .

Hy is alleen tussen die dooies, hy storm op en af en beelde flits deur sy kop: sy skatte, sy beskermings, sy ankers in onsterflikheid – die dagboek is vernietig en die beker is gesteel; wat as, *wat as* die seun van die ander ook weet? Weet hy dalk, het hy reeds opgetree, het hy nog van hulle opgespoor? Sit Dumbledore agter alles? Dumbledore, wat hom altyd verdink het, Dumbledore, dood op sy bevel, Dumbledore, wie se towerstaf nou syne is, maar nogtans vanuit die skandvlek van die dood uitreik deur die seun, *die seun* –

Maar as die seun enige van sy Horcruxe vernietig het, sou hy, die Heer Voldemort, tog sekerlik daarvan geweet het, dit gevoel het? Hy, die grootste towenaar van almal, hy, die magtigste, hy, die een wat Dumbledore en hoeveel ander nikswerd, naamlose towenaars dood gemaak het: hoe sal die Heer Voldemort nie weet as hyself, die belangrikste en kosbaarste een van almal, aangeval en vermink is nie?

Dit is waar, hy het dit nie gevoel toe die dagboek vernietig is nie, maar hy het gedink dit was omdat hy nie 'n liggaam gehad het om mee te voel nie, omdat hy minder as 'n spook was . . . nee, die res is tog sekerlik veilig . . . die ander Horcruxe moet ongeskonde wees . . .

Maar hy moet weet, hy moet seker wees . . . Hy stap heen en weer in die vertrek, skop die kabouter se lyk in die verbyloop opsy, en die beelde word wasig en brand in sy kokende brein: die meer, die krot, en Hogwarts –

'n Krieseltjie kalmte laat sy rasende woede nou afkoel: hoe kan die seun weet hy het die ring in die Gaunts se krot weggesteek? Niemand het ooit geweet hy is familie van die Gaunts nie; hy het die verwantskap verbloem, die moorde is nooit met hom verbind nie: die ring is tog sekerlik veilig.

En hoe kan die seun, of enigiemand anders, van die grot weet en deur sy beskerming dring? Die idee dat die hangertjie gesteel is, is absurd . . .

Wat betref die skool: net hy weet waar in Hogwarts hy die Horcrux weggesteek het, want net hy het daardie plek se diepste geheime deurgrond . . .

En dan is daar nog Nagini, wat nou naby aan hom moet bly en nie meer weggestuur moet word om haar opdragte uit te voer nie, wat onder sy beskerming moet bly . . .

Maar om seker te maak, doodseker, moet hy na elkeen van sy wegsteekplekke terugkeer, hy moet elkeen van sy Horcruxe se beskerming verdubbel . . . 'n taak, net soos die soeke na die Vlierstaf, wat hy alleen moet aanpak . . .

Na watter een moet hy eerste gaan, watter een verkeer in die meeste gevaar? 'n Ou onrustigheid flikker in hom. Dumbledore het geweet wat sy tweede voornaam is . . . Dumbledore kon dit dalk met die Gaunts verbind het . . . hulle verlate krot is miskien die onveiligste van al sy wegsteekplekke, hy sal eerste soontoe gaan . . .

Die meer is tog sekerlik onmoontlik . . . hoewel daar 'n vae moontlikheid is dat Dumbledore dalk by die weeshuis van sommige van sy wandade gehoor het.

En Hogwarts . . . maar hy weet sy Horcrux daar is veilig, dit is onmoontlik vir Potter om ongesiens by Hogsmeade in te gaan, wat nog van die skool. Maar dit sal nogtans raadsaam wees om Snape te waarsku dat die seun dalk weer by die kasteel kan probeer inkom . . . Dit sal natuurlik dom wees om vir Snape te sê hoekom die seun dalk mag terugkom; dit was 'n gruwelike fout om Bellatrix en Malfoy te vertrou: hulle onnoselheid en nalatigheid het bewys hoe onwys dit is om enigiemand te vertrou.

Ja, hy sal eerste na die Gaunts se krot toe gaan, en Nagini saam met hom neem: hy gaan die slang nie weer onder sy oë uitlaat nie . . . En hy stap met lang treë by die vertrek uit, deur die portaal en uit tot in die donker tuin waar die fontein speel. Hy roep die slang in Parseltaal en sy kom kronkelend en volg hom soos 'n lang skaduwee . . .

Harry se oë vlieg oop toe hy homself terug na die hede toe ruk: hy lê op die meer se oewer in die ondergaande son, en Ron en Hermione kyk af na hom. Te oordeel na hulle bekommerde blik, en sy litteken wat so aanhoudend klop, het sy skielike ekskursie na Voldemort se gedagtes nie ongesiens verbygegaan nie. Hy kom sukkelend regop, sidder, is vaagweg verbaas dat hy steeds deurnat is, en sien die beker wat onskuldig in die gras voor hom lê en die diepblou meer waarin die kwynende son goue strepe trek.

"Hy weet." Sy eie stem klink snaaks en laag ná Voldemort se skril gegil. "Hy weet, en hy gaan kyk of die ander nog op hulle plekke is, en die laaste een," hy is reeds op die been, "is by Hogwarts. Ek het dit geweet. Ek het dit *geweet.*"

"Wat?"

Ron gaap hom aan; Hermione kom op haar knieë en lyk bekommerd.

"Maar wat het jy gesien? Hoe weet jy?"

"Ek het gesien hoe hy uitvind van die beker, ek – ek was in sy kop, hy's –" Harry dink aan almal wat doodgemaak is, "hy's vieslik kwaad, en bang ook, hy kan nie verstaan hoe ons weet nie, en nou gaan hy seker maak die ander is veilig, eerste die ring. Hy dink die een in Hogwarts is veilig, omdat Snape daar is, want dit sal so moeilik wees om ongesiens daar in te kom, ek dink hy gaan laaste na daardie een toe, maar nogtans, hy kan binne 'n paar uur daar wees –"

"Het jy gesien waar in Hogwarts dit is?" vra Ron wat nou ook orent sukkel.

"Nee, hy't daarop gekonsentreer om Snape te waarsku, hy't nie gedink aan waar presies dit is nie –"

"Wag, *wag!*" roep Hermione uit toe Ron die Horcrux optel en Harry die Onsigbaarheidsmantel weer uithaal. "Ons kan nie net gaan nie, ons het nie 'n plan nie, ons moet –"

"Ons moet aan die gang kom," sê Harry streng. Hy het gehoop hulle kan eers slaap en het nogal daarna uitgesien om in die nuwe tent te bly, maar dit is nou onmoontlik. "Kan julle dink wat hy gaan doen as hy besef die ring en die hangertjie is weg? Wat as hy die Hogwarts Horcrux wegvat, as hy besluit dis nie veilig genoeg nie?"

"Maar hoe gaan ons daar inkom?"

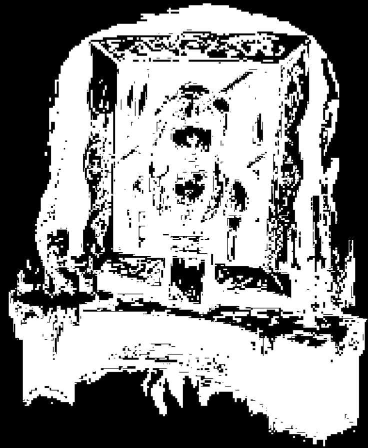
"Ons gaan Hogsmeade toe," sê Harry, "dan probeer ons iets uitwerk as ons sien hoe lyk die beskerming om die skool. Kom klim onder die Mantel in, Hermione, ek wil hê ons moet dié keer bymekaar bly."

"Maar ons pas nie regtig in nie –"

"Dit sal donker wees, niemand gaan ons voete opmerk nie."

Die geklap van enorme vlerke weerklink oor die swart water: die draak het hom vol gedrink en styg in die lug op. Hulle onderbreek hulle voorbereidings en kyk hoe hy hoër en hoër klim, nou swart teen die lug wat vinnig donker word, totdat hy oor 'n nabygeleë berg verdwyn. Dan tree Hermione vorentoe en neem haar plek tussen die ander twee in. Harry trek die Mantel so ver moontlik oor hulle af, en saam tol hulle op een plek en tuimel die digte duisternis in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



THE MISSING MIRROR

Harry's feet touched road. He saw the achingly familiar Hogsmeade High Street: dark shop fronts, and the outline of black mountains beyond the village, and the curve in the road ahead that led off toward Hogwarts, and light spilling from the windows of the Three Broomsticks, and with a lurch of the heart he remembered, with piercing accuracy, how he had landed here nearly a year before, supporting a desperately weak Dumbledore; all this in a second, upon landing — and then, even as he relaxed his grip upon Ron's and Hermione's arms, it happened.

The air was rent by a scream that sounded like Voldemort's when he had realized the cup had been stolen: It tore at every nerve in Harry's body, and he knew immediately that their appearance had

caused it. Even as he looked at the other two beneath the Cloak, the door of the Three Broomsticks burst open and a dozen cloaked and hooded Death Eaters dashed into the street, their wands aloft.

Harry seized Ron's wrist as he raised his wand; there were too many of them to Stun: Even attempting it would give away their position. One of the Death Eaters waved his wand and the scream stopped, still echoing around the distant mountains.

"Accio Cloak!" roared one of the Death Eaters.

Harry seized its folds, but it made no attempt to escape: The Summoning Charm had not worked on it.

"Not under your wrapper, then, Potter?" yelled the Death Eater who had tried the charm, and then to his fellows, "Spread out. He's here."

Six of the Death Eaters ran toward them: Harry, Ron, and Hermione backed as quickly as possible down the nearest side street, and the Death Eaters missed them by inches. They waited in the darkness, listening to the footsteps running up and down, beams of light flying along the street from the Death Eaters' searching wands.

"Let's just leave!" Hermione whispered. "Disapparate now!"

"Great idea," said Ron, but before Harry could reply a Death Eater shouted,

"We know you're here, Potter, and there's no getting away! We'll find you!"

"They were ready for us," whispered Harry. "They set up that spell to tell them we'd come. I reckon they've done something to keep us here, trap us —"

"What about dementors?" called another Death Eater. "Let 'em

have free rein, they'd find him quick enough!"

"The Dark Lord wants Potter dead by no hand but his —"

"— an' dementors won't kill him! The Dark Lord wants Potter's life, not his soul. He'll be easier to kill if he's been Kissed first!"

There were noises of agreement. Dread filled Harry: To repel dementors they would have to produce Patronuses, which would give them away immediately.

"We're going to have to try to Disapparate, Harry!" Hermione whispered.

Even as she said it, he felt the unnatural cold begin to steal over the street. Light was sucked from the environment right up to the stars, which vanished. In the pitch-blackness, he felt Hermione take hold of his arm and together, they turned on the spot.

The air through which they needed to move seemed to have become solid: They could not Disapparate; the Death Eaters had cast their charms well. The cold was biting deeper and deeper into Harry's flesh. He, Ron, and Hermione retreated down the side street, groping their way along the wall, trying not to make a sound. Then, around the corner, gliding noiselessly, came dementors, ten or more of them, visible because they were of a denser darkness than their surroundings, with their black cloaks and their scabbed and rotting hands. Could they sense fear in the vicinity? Harry was sure of it: They seemed to be coming more quickly now, taking those dragging, rattling breaths he detested, tasting despair on the air, closing in —

He raised his wand: He could not, would not, suffer the Dementor's Kiss, whatever happened afterward. It was of Ron and Hermione that he thought as he whispered, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

The silver stag burst from his wand and charged: The dementors scattered and there was a triumphant yell from somewhere out of sight.

"It's him, down there, down there, I saw his Patronus, it was a stag!"

The dementors had retreated, the stars were popping out again, and the footsteps of the Death Eaters were becoming louder; but before Harry in his panic could decide what to do, there was a grinding of bolts nearby, a door opened on the left-hand side of the narrow street, and a rough voice said, "Potter, in here, quick!"

He obeyed without hesitation: The three of them hurtled through the open doorway.

"Upstairs, keep the Cloak on, keep quiet!" muttered a tall figure, passing them on his way into the street and slamming the door behind him.

Harry had had no idea where they were, but now he saw, by the stuttering light of a single candle, the grubby, sawdust-strewn bar of the Hog's Head Inn. They ran behind the counter and through a second doorway, which led to a rickety wooden staircase that they climbed as fast as they could. The stairs opened onto a sitting room with a threadbare carpet and a small fireplace, above which hung a single large oil painting of a blonde girl who gazed out at the room with a kind of vacant sweetness.

Shouts reached them from the street below. Still wearing the Invisibility Cloak, they crept toward the grimy window and looked down. Their savior, whom Harry now recognized as the Hog's Head's barman, was the only person not wearing a hood.

"So what?" he was bellowing into one of the hooded faces. "So what? You send dementors down my street, I'll send a Patronus back at 'em! I'm not having 'em near me, I've told you that, I'm not having it!"

"That wasn't your Patronus!" said a Death Eater. "That was a stag, it was Potter's!"

"Stag!" roared the barman, and he pulled out a wand. "Stag! You idiot — *Expecto Patronum!*"

Something huge and horned erupted from the wand: Head down, it charged toward the High Street and out of sight.

"That's not what I saw —" said the Death Eater, though with less certainty.

"Curfew's been broken, you heard the noise," one of his companions told the barman. "Someone was out in the street against regulations —"

"If I want to put my cat out, I will, and be damned to your curfew!"

"*You* set off the Caterwauling Charm?"

"What if I did? Going to cart me off to Azkaban? Kill me for sticking my nose out my own front door? Do it, then, if you want to! But I hope for your sakes you haven't pressed your little Dark Marks and summoned him. He's not going to like being called here for me and my old cat, is he, now?"

"Don't you worry about us," said one of the Death Eaters, "worry about yourself, breaking curfew!"

"And where will you lot traffick potions and poisons when my pub's closed down? What'll happen to your little sidelines then?"

"Are you threatening — ?"

"I keep my mouth shut, it's why you come here, isn't it?"

"I still say I saw a stag Patronus!" shouted the first Death Eater.

"Stag?" roared the barman. "It's a *goat*, idiot!"

"All right, we made a mistake," said the second Death Eater. "Break curfew again and we won't be so lenient!"

The Death Eaters strode back toward the High Street. Hermione moaned with relief, wove out from under the Cloak, and sat down on a wobble-legged chair. Harry drew the curtains tight shut, then pulled the Cloak off himself and Ron. They could hear the barman down below, rebolting the door of the bar, then climbing the stairs.

Harry's attention was caught by something on the mantelpiece: a small, rectangular mirror propped on top of it, right beneath the portrait of the girl.

The barman entered the room.

"You bloody fools," he said gruffly, looking from one to the other of them. "What were you thinking, coming here?"

"Thank you," said Harry. "We can't thank you enough. You saved our lives."

The barman grunted. Harry approached him, looking up into the face, trying to see past the long, stringy, wire-gray hair and beard. He wore spectacles. Behind the dirty lenses, the eyes were a piercing, brilliant blue.

"It's your eye I've been seeing in the mirror."

There was silence in the room. Harry and the barman looked at each other.

"You sent Dobby."

The barman nodded and looked around for the elf.

"Thought he'd be with you. Where've you left him?"

"He's dead," said Harry. "Bellatrix Lestrange killed him."

The barman's face was impassive. After a few moments he said, "I'm sorry to hear it. I liked that elf."

He turned away, lighting lamps with prods of his wand, not looking at any of them.

"You're Aberforth," said Harry to the man's back.

He neither confirmed nor denied it, but bent to light the fire.

"How did you get this?" Harry asked, walking across to Sirius's mirror, the twin of the one he had broken nearly two years before.

"Bought it from Dung 'bout a year ago," said Aberforth. "Albus told me what it was. Been trying to keep an eye out for you."

Ron gasped.

"The silver doe!" he said excitedly. "Was that you too?"

"What are you talking about?" said Aberforth.

"Someone sent a doe Patronus to us!"

"Brains like that, you could be a Death Eater, son. Haven't I just proved my Patronus is a goat?"

"Oh," said Ron. "Yeah . . . well, I'm hungry!" he added defensively as his stomach gave an enormous rumble.

"I got food," said Aberforth, and he sloped out of the room, reappearing moments later with a large loaf of bread, some cheese, and a pewter jug of mead, which he set upon a small table in front of the fire. Ravenous, they ate and drank, and for a while there was silence but for the crackle of the fire, the clink of goblets, and the sound of chewing.

"Right then," said Aberforth when they had eaten their fill, and Harry and Ron sat slumped dozily in their chairs. "We need to think of the best way to get you out of here. Can't be done by night, you heard what happens if anyone moves outdoors during darkness: Caterwauling Charm's set off, they'll be onto you like bowtruckles on doxy eggs. I don't reckon I'll be able to pass off a stag as a goat a second time. Wait for daybreak when curfew lifts, then you can put your Cloak back on and set out on foot. Get right out of Hogsmeade, up into the mountains, and you'll be able to Disapparate there. Might see Hagrid. He's been hiding in a cave up there with Grawp ever since they tried to arrest him."

"We're not leaving," said Harry. "We need to get into Hogwarts."

"Don't be stupid, boy," said Aberforth.

"We've got to," said Harry.

"What you've got to do," said Aberforth, leaning forward, "is to get as far from here as you can."

"You don't understand. There isn't much time. We've got to get into the castle. Dumbledore — I mean, your brother — wanted us —"

The firelight made the grimy lenses of Aberforth's glasses momentarily opaque, a bright flat white, and Harry remembered the blind eyes of the giant spider, Aragog.

"My brother Albus wanted a lot of things," said Aberforth, "and people had a habit of getting hurt while he was carrying out his grand plans. You get away from this school, Potter, and out of the country if you can. Forget my brother and his clever schemes. He's gone where none of this can hurt him, and you don't owe him anything."

"You don't understand," said Harry again.

"Oh, don't I?" said Aberforth quietly. "You don't think I understood my own brother? Think you knew Albus better than I did?"

"I didn't mean that," said Harry, whose brain felt sluggish with exhaustion and from the surfeit of food and wine. "It's . . . he left me a job."

"Did he now?" said Aberforth. "Nice job, I hope? Pleasant? Easy? Sort of thing you'd expect an unqualified wizard kid to be able to do without overstretching themselves?"

Ron gave a rather grim laugh. Hermione was looking strained.

"I-it's not easy, no," said Harry. "But I've got to —"

"'Got to'? Why *'got to'*? He's dead, isn't he?" said Aberforth roughly. "Let it go, boy, before you follow him! Save yourself!"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I —" Harry felt overwhelmed; he could not explain, so he took the offensive instead. "But you're fighting too, you're in the Order of the Phoenix —"

"I was," said Aberforth. "The Order of the Phoenix is finished. You-Know-Who's won, it's over, and anyone who's pretending different's kidding themselves. It'll never be safe for you here, Potter, he wants you too badly. So go abroad, go into hiding, save yourself. Best take these two with you." He jerked a thumb at Ron and Hermione. "They'll be in danger long as they live now everyone knows they've been working with you."

"I can't leave," said Harry. "I've got a job —"

"Give it to someone else!"

"I can't. It's got to be me, Dumbledore explained it all —"

"Oh, did he now? And did he tell you everything, was he honest with you?"

Harry wanted with all his heart to say "Yes," but somehow the simple word would not rise to his lips. Aberforth seemed to know what he was thinking.

"I knew my brother, Potter. He learned secrecy at our mother's knee. Secrets and lies, that's how we grew up, and Albus . . . he was a natural."

The old man's eyes traveled to the painting of the girl over the mantelpiece. It was, now Harry looked around properly, the only picture in the room. There was no photograph of Albus Dumbledore, nor of anyone else.

"Mr. Dumbledore?" said Hermione rather timidly. "Is that your sister? Ariana?"

"Yes," said Aberforth tersely. "Been reading Rita Skeeter, have you, missy?"

Even by the rosy light of the fire it was clear that Hermione had turned red.

"Elphias Doge mentioned her to us," said Harry, trying to spare Hermione.

"That old berk," muttered Aberforth, taking another swig of mead. "Thought the sun shone out of my brother's every orifice, he did. Well, so did plenty of people, you three included, by the looks of it."

Harry kept quiet. He did not want to express the doubts and uncertainties about Dumbledore that had riddled him for months now.

He had made his choice while he dug Dobby's grave, he had decided to continue along the winding, dangerous path indicated for him by Albus Dumbledore, to accept that he had not been told everything that he wanted to know, but simply to trust. He had no desire to doubt again; he did not want to hear anything that would deflect him from his purpose. He met Aberforth's gaze, which was so strikingly like his brother's: The bright blue eyes gave the same impression that they were X-raying the object of their scrutiny, and Harry thought that Aberforth knew what he was thinking and despised him for it.

"Professor Dumbledore cared about Harry, very much," said Hermione in a low voice.

"Did he now?" said Aberforth. "Funny thing, how many of the people my brother cared about very much ended up in a worse state than if he'd left 'em well alone."

"What do you mean?" asked Hermione breathlessly.

"Never you mind," said Aberforth.

"But that's a really serious thing to say!" said Hermione. "Are you — are you talking about your sister?"

Aberforth glared at her: His lips moved as if he were chewing the words he was holding back. Then he burst into speech.

"When my sister was six years old, she was attacked, set upon, by three Muggle boys. They'd seen her doing magic, spying through the back garden hedge: She was a kid, she couldn't control it, no witch or wizard can at that age. What they saw scared them, I expect. They forced their way through the hedge, and when she couldn't show them the trick, they got a bit carried away trying to stop the little freak doing it."

Hermione's eyes were huge in the firelight; Ron looked slightly sick. Aberforth stood up, tall as Albus, and suddenly terrible in his anger and the intensity of his pain.

"It destroyed her, what they did: She was never right again. She wouldn't use magic, but she couldn't get rid of it; it turned inward and drove her mad, it exploded out of her when she couldn't control it, and at times she was strange and dangerous. But mostly she was sweet and scared and harmless.

"And my father went after the bastards that did it," said Aberforth, "and attacked them. And they locked him up in Azkaban for it. He never said why he'd done it, because if the Ministry had known what Ariana had become, she'd have been locked up in St. Mungo's for good. They'd have seen her as a serious threat to the International Statute of Secrecy, unbalanced like she was, with magic exploding out of her at moments when she couldn't keep it in any longer.

"We had to keep her safe and quiet. We moved house, put it about she was ill, and my mother looked after her, and tried to keep her calm and happy.

"*I* was her favorite," he said, and as he said it, a grubby schoolboy seemed to look out through Aberforth's wrinkles and tangled beard. "Not Albus, he was always up in his bedroom when he was home, reading his books and counting his prizes, keeping up with his correspondence with 'the most notable magical names of the day,'" Aberforth sneered. "*He* didn't want to be bothered with her. She liked me best. I could get her to eat when she wouldn't do it for my mother, I could get her to calm down when she was in one of her rages, and when she was quiet, she used to help me feed the goats.

"Then, when she was fourteen . . . See, I wasn't there," said Aberforth. "If I'd been there, I could have calmed her down. She had one of her rages, and my mother wasn't as young as she was, and . . . it was an accident. Ariana couldn't control it. But my mother was killed."

Harry felt a horrible mixture of pity and repulsion; he did not want to hear any more, but Aberforth kept talking, and Harry wondered how long it had been since he had spoken about this; whether, in fact, he had ever spoken about it.

"So that put paid to Albus's trip round the world with little Doge. The pair of 'em came home for my mother's funeral and then Doge went off on his own, and Albus settled down as head of the family. Ha!"

Aberforth spat into the fire.

"I'd have looked after her, I told him so, I didn't care about school, I'd have stayed home and done it. He told me I had to finish my education and *he'd* take over from my mother. Bit of a comedown for Mr. Brilliant, there's no prizes for looking after your half-mad sister, stopping her blowing up the house every other day. But he did all right for a few weeks . . . till he came."

And now a positively dangerous look crept over Aberforth's face.

"Grindelwald. And at last, my brother had an *equal* to talk to, someone just as bright and talented as *he* was. And looking after Ariana took a backseat then, while they were hatching all their plans for a new Wizarding order, and looking for *Hallows,* and whatever else it was they were so interested in. Grand plans for the benefit of all Wizardkind, and if one young girl got neglected, what did that

matter, when Albus was working for *the greater good*?

"But after a few weeks of it, I'd had enough, I had. It was nearly time for me to go back to Hogwarts, so I told 'em, both of 'em, face-to-face, like I am to you, now," and Aberforth looked down at Harry, and it took little imagination to see him as a teenager, wiry and angry, confronting his elder brother. "I told him, you'd better give it up now. You can't move her, she's in no fit state, you can't take her with you, wherever it is you're planning to go, when you're making your clever speeches, trying to whip yourselves up a following. He didn't like that," said Aberforth, and his eyes were briefly occluded by the firelight on the lenses of his glasses: They shone white and blind again. "Grindelwald didn't like that at all. He got angry. He told me what a stupid little boy I was, trying to stand in the way of him and my brilliant brother . . . Didn't I *understand,* my poor sister wouldn't *have* to be hidden once they'd changed the world, and led the wizards out of hiding, and taught the Muggles their place?

"And there was an argument . . . and I pulled out my wand, and he pulled out his, and I had the Cruciatus Curse used on me by my brother's best friend — and Albus was trying to stop him, and then all three of us were dueling, and the flashing lights and the bangs set her off, she couldn't stand it —"

The color was draining from Aberforth's face as though he had suffered a mortal wound.

"— and I think she wanted to help, but she didn't really know what she was doing, and I don't know which of us did it, it could have been any of us — and she was dead."

His voice broke on the last word and he dropped down into the

nearest chair. Hermione's face was wet with tears, and Ron was almost as pale as Aberforth. Harry felt nothing but revulsion: He wished he had not heard it, wished he could wash his mind clean of it.

"I'm so . . . I'm so sorry," Hermione whispered.

"Gone," croaked Aberforth. "Gone forever."

He wiped his nose on his cuff and cleared his throat.

"'Course, Grindelwald scarpered. He had a bit of a track record already, back in his own country, and he didn't want Ariana set to his account too. And Albus was free, wasn't he? Free of the burden of his sister, free to become the greatest wizard of the —"

"He was never free," said Harry.

"I beg your pardon?" said Aberforth.

"Never," said Harry. "The night that your brother died, he drank a potion that drove him out of his mind. He started screaming, pleading with someone who wasn't there. 'Don't hurt them, please . . . hurt me instead.'"

Ron and Hermione were staring at Harry. He had never gone into details about what had happened on the island on the lake: The events that had taken place after he and Dumbledore had returned to Hogwarts had eclipsed it so thoroughly.

"He thought he was back there with you and Grindelwald, I know he did," said Harry, remembering Dumbledore whimpering, pleading. "He thought he was watching Grindelwald hurting you and Ariana. . . . It was torture to him, if you'd seen him then, you wouldn't say he was free."

Aberforth seemed lost in contemplation of his own knotted and

veined hands. After a long pause he said, "How can you be sure, Potter, that my brother wasn't more interested in the greater good than in you? How can you be sure you aren't dispensable, just like my little sister?"

A shard of ice seemed to pierce Harry's heart.

"I don't believe it. Dumbledore loved Harry," said Hermione.

"Why didn't he tell him to hide, then?" shot back Aberforth. "Why didn't he say to him, 'Take care of yourself, here's how to survive'?"

"Because," said Harry before Hermione could answer, "sometimes you've *got* to think about more than your own safety! Sometimes you've *got* to think about the greater good! This is war!"

"You're seventeen, boy!"

"I'm of age, and I'm going to keep fighting even if you've given up!"

"Who says I've given up?"

"'The Order of the Phoenix is finished,'" Harry repeated. "'You-Know-Who's won, it's over, and anyone who's pretending different's kidding themselves.'"

"I don't say I like it, but it's the truth!"

"No, it isn't," said Harry. "Your brother knew how to finish You-Know-Who and he passed the knowledge on to me. I'm going to keep going until I succeed — or I die. Don't think I don't know how this might end. I've known it for years."

He waited for Aberforth to jeer or to argue, but he did not. He merely scowled.

"We need to get into Hogwarts," said Harry again. "If you can't help us, we'll wait till daybreak, leave you in peace, and try to find a

way in ourselves. If you *can* help us — well, now would be a great time to mention it."

Aberforth remained fixed in his chair, gazing at Harry with the eyes that were so extraordinarily like his brother's. At last he cleared his throat, got to his feet, walked around the little table, and approached the portrait of Ariana.

"You know what to do," he said.

She smiled, turned, and walked away, not as people in portraits usually did, out of the sides of their frames, but along what seemed to be a long tunnel painted behind her. They watched her slight figure retreating until finally she was swallowed by the darkness.

"Er — what — ?" began Ron.

"There's only one way in now," said Aberforth. "You must know they've got all the old secret passageways covered at both ends, dementors all around the boundary walls, regular patrols inside the school from what my sources tell me. The place has never been so heavily guarded. How you expect to do anything once you get inside it, with Snape in charge and the Carrows as his deputies . . . well, that's your lookout, isn't it? You say you're prepared to die."

"But what . . . ?" said Hermione, frowning at Ariana's picture.

A tiny white dot had reappeared at the end of the painted tunnel, and now Ariana was walking back toward them, growing bigger and bigger as she came. But there was somebody else with her now, someone taller than she was, who was limping along, looking excited. His hair was longer than Harry had ever seen it: He appeared to have suffered several gashes to his face and his clothes were ripped and torn. Larger and larger the two figures grew, until

only their heads and shoulders filled the portrait. Then the whole thing swung forward on the wall like a little door, and the entrance to a real tunnel was revealed. And out of it, his hair overgrown, his face cut, his robes ripped, clambered the real Neville Longbottom, who gave a roar of delight, leapt down from the mantelpiece, and yelled, “I knew you’d come! *I knew it, Harry!*”

— HOOFSTUK AGT-EN-TWINTIG —

Die Spieël se Maat

Harry se voete vat grond. Hy sien Hogsmeade se pynlik bekende Hoofstraat: donker winkelvensters, en die buitelyne van die swart berge anderkant die dorpie, en die draai in die pad wat na Hogwarts lei, en lig wat uit die Drie Besemstokke se vensters stroom, en sy hart spring toe hy met hartverskeurende helderheid onthou hoe hy amper 'n jaar gelede hier geland het met 'n tot die dood toe swak Dumbledore wat op hom steun; dit alles binne 'n sekonde, terwyl hulle land – en dan, nes hy sy greep op Ron en Hermione se arms laat verslap, gebeur dit.

'n Gil wat klink soos Voldemort s'n toe hy besef die beker is gesteel, weerklink deur die lug: dit deurklief elke senuwee in Harry se lyf, en hy weet onmiddellik hulle aankoms het dit veroorsaak. Terwyl hy nog na die ander twee onder die Mantel kyk, bars die Drie Besemstokke se deur oop en 'n dosyn Doodseters in mantels met kappe op storm straat toe met hulle towerstawwe gereed.

Harry gryp Ron se pols toe hy sy towerstaf oplig. Hulle is te veel om te Bedwelm: selfs 'n poging om dit te doen, sal hulle posisie verraai. Een van die Doodseters swaai sy towerstaf en die gil hou op, maar eggo steeds in die berge in die verte.

"Accio Mantel!" brul een van die Doodseters.

Harry gryp die voue vas, maar dit wend nie 'n poging aan om te ontsnap nie: die Ontbiedtowerspreuk werk nie daarop nie.

"So jy's nie onder jou mantel nie, Potter?" roep die Doodseter wat die towerspreuk probeer uitoefen het, en dan beveel hy sy makkers: "Sprei uit. Hy's hier."

Ses van die Doodseters hardloop op hulle af: Harry, Ron en Hermione retireer so vinnig moontlik in die naaste systraatjie in, en die Doodseters mis hulle net-net. Hulle wag in die donker, luister na die voetstappe wat op en af hardloop en sien hoe ligstrale heen en weer in die straat vlieg terwyl die Doodseters met hulle towerstawwe rondsoek.

"Kom ons gee net pad!" fluister Hermione. "Kom ons Disappareer nou dadelik!"

"Goeie idee," sê Ron, maar voor Harry kan antwoord, skree 'n Doodseter: "Ons weet jy's hier, Potter, en jy gaan nie wegkom nie! Ons gaan jou kry!"

"Hulle was reg vir ons," fluister Harry. "Hulle het daardie towerspreuk gebruik om vir hulle te sê wanneer ons hier aankom. Ek dink hulle't ook iets gedoen om ons hier te hou, om ons vas te keer –"

"Wat van Dementors?" roep 'n ander Doodseter. "Gee hulle vrye teuels, hulle sal hom gou genoeg kry!"

"Die Donker Heer wil Potter eiehandig doodmaak –"

"– maar die Dementors sal hom nie doodmaak nie! Die Donker Heer wil Potter se lewe neem, nie sy siel nie. Dit sal makliker wees om hom dood te maak ná 'n kus!"

Daar word brommend saamgestem. Harry is vervul met vrees: om die Dementors te verdryf, sal hulle Patronusse moet optower, en dit sal hulle dadelik verraai.

"Harry, ons moet probeer om te Disappareer!" fluister Hermione. Terwyl sy dit nog sê, voel hy die onnatuurlike koue oor die straat aangesluip kom. Lig word uit die omgewing opgesuig tot reg bo by die sterre, wat verdwyn. In die pikdonker voel hy hoe Hermione sy arm vasgryp en hulle begin saam op een plek tol.

Dit is asof die lug waardeur hulle moet beweeg solied geword het: hulle kan nie Disappareer nie; die Doodseters het hulle towerspreuke goed uitgevoer. Die koue vreet dieper en dieper in Harry se lyf in. Hy, Ron en Hermione retireer voel-voel verder met die systraatjie af langs die muur en probeer om nie 'n geluid te maak nie. Dan kom hulle om die hoek: tien of meer Dementors gly geruisloos nader met hulle swart mantels en verrottende hande vol rowe, sigbaar omdat hulle uit 'n digter duisternis as hulle omgewing bestaan. Kan hulle vrees in die omgewing aanvoel? Harry is seker daarvan: dit lyk of hulle nou vinniger aankom, hy hoor daardie uitgerekte, roggelende asemhaling wat hy so verafsku, hulle proe wanhoop in die lug en kom al hoe nader –

Hy lig sy towerstaf: hy kan nie, sal nie 'n Dementorskus duld nie, al gebeur wat ook al daarna. Hy dink aan Ron en Hermione en fluister: "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Die silwer takbok bars voor by sy towerstaf uit en storm: die Dementors spat uitmekaar en daar is 'n triomfantlike uitroep van iewers uit die oog uit.

"Dis hy, daar onder, daar onder, ek het sy Patronus gesien, dit was 'n takbok!"

Die Dementors het teruggeval, die sterre kom weer uit en die Doodseters se voetstappe word harder, maar voor Harry paniekbevange kan besluit wat om te doen, hoor hy iewers naby grendels knars. 'n Deur gaan aan die linkerkant van die nou straatjie oop en 'n growwe stem sê: "Potter, hier in, gou!"

Hy gehoorsaam sonder om te aarsel: hulle drie nael by die oop deur in.

"Boontoe, hou die Mantel aan en bly stil!" mompel 'n lang figuur wat verby hulle uit straat toe beweeg en die deur agter hom toeklap.

Harry het nie 'n benul waar hulle is nie, maar nou sien hy by 'n enkele kers se flikkerende liggie dit is die Swynenes se smerige, saagselbestrooide kroeg. Hulle hardloop agter die kroegtoonbank in en deur 'n tweede deur wat lei na 'n lendelam houttrap waarmee hulle so vinnig moontlik opklim. Die trap loop uit op 'n sitkamer met 'n verslete tapyt en 'n klein kaggel waarbo 'n enkele olieverfskildery hang van 'n blonde meisie wat half afwesig maar minsaam oor die vertrek uitstaar.

Uitroepe bereik hulle van onder uit die straat. Nog steeds onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel sluip hulle na die vuil venster toe en kyk af. Hulle redder, wat Harry nou as die Swynenes se kroegman herken, is die enigste persoon wat nie 'n mantelkap ophet nie.

"Wat daarvan?" brul hy vir een van die gesigte onder 'n kap. "Wat daarvan? As julle Dementors in my straat af stuur, sal ek 'n Patronus op hulle sit! Ek soek hulle nie naby my nie, ek het julle gesê, wat te erg is, is te erg!"

"Dit was nie jou Patronus nie!" sê 'n Doodseter. "Dit was 'n takbok, dit was Potter s'n!"

" 'n Takbok!" brul die kroegman en pluk 'n towerstaf uit. " 'n Takbok! Jou idioot – *expecto patronum!*"

Iets ysliks en met horings spring by die towerstaf uit: dit laat sak sy kop, storm in die hoofstraat se rigting en verdwyn.

"Dis nie wat ek gesien het nie –" sê die Doodseter, hoewel hy minder seker klink.

"Die aandklokreël is verbreek, jy't die geraas gehoor," sê een van sy makkers vir die kroegman. "Iemand was teen die regulasies op straat –"

"As ek my kat wil laat uitgaan, sal ek dit doen, biedêm julle aandklok!"

"Het *jy* die Kattegekermspreuk laat afgaan?"

"Wat as ek het? Gaan julle my Azkaban toe verban? My doodmaak oor ek my neus by my eie voordeur uitgesteek het? Wel, doen dit dan as julle wil! Maar ek hoop vir julle onthalwe julle't nie op

julle Donker Merkies gedruk en hom ontbied nie. Hy gaan nie daarvan hou om net oor my en my kat hiernatoe geroep te word nie, gaan hy?"

"Moenie jou oor ons bekommer nie," sê een van die Doodseters, "wees eerder bekommerd oor jouself wat die aandklokreël verbreek het!"

"En waar gaan julle spul met towerdrankies en gif smous as my kroeg toegemaak word? Waar gaan julle dan agteraf ietsie ekstra maak?"

"Dreig jy om –?"

"Ek hou my mond, dis hoekom julle hiernatoe kom, dan nie?"

"Ek sê nog steeds ek het 'n Takbokpatronus gesien!" roep die eerste Doodseter.

"'n Takbok?" brul die kroegman. "Dis 'n *bok*, jou idioot!"

"Oukei, ons het 'n fout gemaak," sê die tweede Doodseter. "Maar verbreek weer die klokreël en ons sal nie so toegeeflik wees nie!"

Die Doodseters loop terug na die Hoofstraat toe. Hermione kreun van verligting, wikkel haar onder die Mantel uit en val op 'n wankelrige stoel neer. Harry trek die gordyne styf toe en haal die Mantel van hom en Ron af. Hulle hoor die kroegman onder; hy grendel die kroeg se deur weer en kom dan met die trap op.

Iets op die kaggelrak trek Harry se aandag: 'n klein, vierkantige spieël is bo-op dit staangemaak, reg onder die portret van die meisie.

Die kroegman kom by die vertrek in.

"Julle blerrie ape," sê hy bars en kyk van die een na die ander. "Wat het julle besiel om hiernatoe te kom?"

"Dankie," sê Harry, "ons kan nie vir jou dankie genoeg sê nie. Jy't ons lewe gered."

Die kroegman snork. Harry stap tot by hom, kyk op na sy gesig en probeer verby die lang draadgrys toutjieshare en baard kyk. Hy dra 'n bril. Agter die dik lense is die oë 'n deurpriemende helderblou.

"Dis jou oog wat ek in die spieël gesien het."

Daar is stilte in die vertrek. Harry en die kroegman kyk na mekaar.

"Jy't vir Dobby gestuur."

Die kroegman knik en kyk om hom op soek na die elf.

"Dog hy sal by julle wees. Waar't julle hom gelos?"

"Hy's dood," sê Harry. "Bellatrix Lestrange het hom doodgemaak."

Die kroegman se gesig is uitdrukkingloos. Ná 'n paar oomblikke sê hy: "Ek's jammer om dit te hoor. Ek het van daai elf gehou."

Hy draai weg, steek lampe met sy towerstaf aan en kyk nie na een van hulle nie.

"Jy's Aberforth," sê Harry vir die man se rug.

Hy ontken of bevestig dit nie, maar buig vooroor om die kaggel aan te steek.

"Hoe't jy dit in die hande gekry?" vra Harry en loop na Sirius se spieël, die een wat hy amper twee jaar gelede gebreek het, se maat.

"Dit gekoop, by Dung, omtrent 'n jaar gelede," sê Aberforth. "Albus het vir my gesê wat dit is. Het probeer om op die uitkyk vir jou te bly."

Ron snak na asem.

"Die silwer takbokooi!" sê hy opgewonde. "Was dit ook jy?"

"Waarvan praat jy?" vra Aberforth.

"Iemand het 'n Takbokooipatronus na ons toe gestuur!"

"Met so 'n verstand aan jou kan jy 'n Doodseter word, seun. Het ek nie nou net bewys my Patronus is 'n bok nie?"

"O," sê Ron. "Ja . . . wel, ek's honger!" voeg hy verdedigend by terwyl sy maag geweldig gor.

"Ek het kos," sê Aberforth en loop krom by die vertrek uit. Oomblikke later verskyn hy weer met 'n groot brood, kaas en 'n piouterbeker vol heuningbier wat hy op 'n tafeltjie voor die vuur neersit. Rasend honger eet en drink hulle, en dit is 'n ruk lank stil, afgesien van die vuur se geknetter, die geklink van glase en die geluid van hulle kouery.

"Reg," sê Aberforth toe hulle klaar geëet het en Harry en Ron lomerig in hulle stoele wegsak. "Ons moet dink aan die beste manier om julle hier uit te kry. Dit kan nie oornag wees nie, want julle't gehoor wat gebeur as enigiemand in die donker 'n voet buitekant sit: die Kattegekermspreuk gaan af en hulle's op jou soos Takkruipers op Doxie-eiers. Ek dink nie ek sal hulle weer kan oortuig 'n takbok is 'n gewone bok nie. Wag tot dagbreek wanneer die klokreël opgehef word, dan kan julle die Mantel weer oor julle gooi en te voet verdwyn. Sorg dat julle wegkom uit Hogsmeade, mik op berge toe en julle sal daarvandaan kan Disappareer. Dalk loop julle Hagrid raak. Hy kruip saam met Ghrop in 'n grot daar bo weg vandat hulle hom probeer arresteer het."

"Ons gaan nie weg nie," sê Harry. "Ons moet by Hogwarts inkom."

"Moenie onnosel wees nie, seun," sê Aberforth.

"Ons moet soontoe gaan," sê Harry.

"Wat julle moet doen," sê Aberforth en leun vorentoe, "is om so ver as wat julle kan van hier af weg te kom."

"Jy verstaan nie. Daar is nie baie tyd oor nie. Ons moet by die kasteel inkom. Dumbledore – ek bedoel, jou broer – wou hê ons moet –"

Die vuurlig laat Aberforth se aangepakte bril vir 'n oomblik ondeursigtig lyk, 'n saai, dowwe wit, en Harry onthou die reusespinnekop Aragog se blinde oë.

"My broer Albus wou baie dinge hê," sê Aberforth, "en mense het gewoonlik seergekry terwyl hy sy grootse planne uitvoer. Bly weg van hierdie skool af, Potter, en gee pad uit die land as jy kan. Vergeet van my broer en sy slim planne. Hy's weg na waar niks hiervan hom kan seermaak nie, en jy skuld hom niks."

"Jy verstaan nie," sê Harry weer.

"O, ek verstaan nie?" sê Aberforth stilweg. "Jy dink ek het my eie broer nie verstaan nie? Jy dink jy't Albus beter geken as ek?"

"Dis nie wat ek bedoel het nie," sê Harry, wie se brein traag voel van uitputting en te veel eet en drink. "Dis . . . Hy't vir my 'n taak agtergelaat."

"Het hy regtig?" sê Aberforth. "Lekker joppie, hoop ek. Pret? Maklik? Die soort ding wat jy verwag 'n ongekwalifiseerde tienertowenaar sal kan doen sonder om homself te ooreis?"

Ron grynslag stroef. Hermione lyk gespanne.

"Ek – dis nie maklik nie, nee," sê Harry. "Maar ek moet –"

"'Moet'? Hoekom '*moet*' jy? Hy's dood, of hoe?" sê Aberforth bruusk. "Vergeet daarvan, seun, voor jy hom volg! Red jouself!"

"Ek kan nie."

"Hoekom nie?"

"Ek –" Harry voel oorweldig; hy kan nie verduidelik nie, dus gaan hy liewer oor tot aanval. "Maar jy baklei ook, jy's in die Orde van die Feniks –"

"Ek was," sê Aberforth. "Die Orde van die Feniks is in sy peetjie. Jy-Weet-Wie het gewen, dis verby, en enigiemand wat maak of dit nie so is nie, bedrieg homself. Dit sal nooit hier vir jou veilig wees nie, Potter, hy wil jou te bitter graag uitskakel. So gaan oorsee, gaan kruip weg, red jouself. En vat hierdie twee saam met jou, dis beter so." Hy beduie met sy duim na Ron en Hermione. "Hulle sal hulle lewe lank in gevaar wees noudat almal weet hulle het saam met jou gewerk."

"Ek kan nie weggaan nie," sê Harry. "Ek het 'n taak –"

"Gee dit vir iemand anders!"

"Ek kan nie! Dit moet ek wees, Dumbledore het dit alles verduidelik –"

"O, hy het? En het hy vir jou alles vertel, was hy eerlik met jou?"

Harry wil met sy hele hart "ja" sê, maar om die een of ander rede wil daardie eenvoudige woordjie nie oor sy lippe kom nie. Dit lyk of Aberforth weet wat hy dink.

"Ek het my broer geken, Potter. Hy het aan ons ma se knie geleer hoe om geheime te hou. Geheime en leuens, dis waarmee ons grootgeword het, en Albus . . . Hy was uitgeknip daarvoor."

Die ou man se oë beweeg op na die skildery van die meisie bo die kaggelrak. Noudat Harry ordentlik rondkyk, sien hy dit is die enigste prent in die vertrek. Daar is nêrens 'n foto van Albus Dumbledore of enigiemand anders nie.

"Meneer Dumbledore?" vra Hermione bedees. "Is dit jou suster? Ariana?"

"Ja," sê Aberforth bondig. "Jy't Rita Skeeter se boek gelees, nè, juffie?"

Selfs in die vuur se rosige lig is dit duidelik dat Hermione rooi bloos.

"Elphias Doge het haar aan ons genoem," sê Harry om Hermione uit die verleentheid te help.

"Daai ou sot," brom Aberforth en vat nog 'n sluk botterbier. "Het mos gedink die son skyn uit al wat 'n opening in my broer se lyf is. Wel, net soos baie ander mense, onder wie julle drie blykbaar ook tel."

Harry bly stil. Hy wil nie uiting gee aan die twyfel en onsekerheid oor Dumbledore wat nou al maande lank aan hom knaag nie. Hy het sy keuse gemaak toe hy Dobby se graf gegrawe het; hy het besluit om aan te hou loop op die kronkelende, gevaarlike pad wat Albus Dumbledore aan hom uitgewys het, om te aanvaar hy is nie alles vertel wat hy wou weet nie, maar om eenvoudig te vertrou. Hy het geen begeerte om weer te begin twyfel nie, hy wil nie enigiets hoor wat hom weer van sy doelwit sal laat afwyk nie. Hy kyk Aberforth in die oë wat so opvallend baie soos sy broer s'n lyk: die helderblou oë gee 'n mens dieselfde indruk dat hulle 'n X-straal neem van die voorwerp wat hulle betrag, en Harry dink Aberforth weet wat hy dink, en verag hom daarvoor.

"Professor Dumbledore het vir Harry omgegee, baie omgegee," sê Hermione in 'n lae stem.

"Het hy regtig?" sê Aberforth. "Dis snaaks hoeveel mense vir wie my broer omgegee het, op die ou end slegter daaraan toe was as toe hy hulle in vrede gelos het."

"Wat bedoel jy?" vra Hermione ademloos.

"Maak nie saak nie," sê Aberforth.

"Maar dis 'n baie ernstige aantyging!" sê Hermione. "Praat jy – praat jy van jou suster?"

Aberforth gluur haar aan: sy lippe beweeg asof hy die woorde wat hy terughou, kou. Dan trek hy los en begin praat.

"Toe my suster ses jaar oud was, het drie Moggelseuns haar aangeval en aangerand. Hulle't gesien hoe sy towerkunsies doen deur die agterplaas se heining op haar gespioeneer: sy was 'n kind, sy kon dit nie beheer nie, geen heks of towenaar kan op daardie ouderdom nie. Wat ook al hulle gesien het, moet hulle seker bang gemaak het. Toe bars hulle deur die heining en toe sy nie vir hulle kon wys hoe sy die toertjie doen nie, raak hulle 'n bietjie meegevoer in hulle poging om te keer dat die klein frats dit weer doen."

Hermione se oë is yslik groot in die vuurlig. Ron lyk 'n bietjie naar. Aberforth staan op; hy is net so lank soos Albus was, en sy woede en die intensiteit van sy pyn maak hom skielik skrikwekkend.

"Dit het haar vernietig, wat hulle aan haar gedoen het: sy het nooit weer reggekom nie. Sy wou nie towerkrag gebruik nie, maar sy kon nie daarvan ontslae raak nie: dit het binnetoe gekeer en haar tot waansin gedryf, dit het by haar uitgebars wanneer sy dit nie kon beheer nie, en by tye was sy vreemd en gevaarlik. Maar sy was meestal saggeaard, en bang, en skadeloos.

"My pa is agter die bliksems aan wat dit gedoen het," sê Aberforth, "en hy't hulle te lyf gegaan. Toe sluit hulle hom in Azkaban op daarvoor. Hy't nooit gesê hoekom hy dit gedoen het nie, want as die Ministerie geweet het hoe snaaks Ariana geword het, sou hulle haar vir ewig in Sint Mungo opgesluit het. Hulle sou haar as 'n ernstige bedreiging vir die Internasionale Statuut van Stilswye beskou het, 'n ongebalanseerde meisie met towerkrag wat uit haar losbreek op oomblikke dat sy dit nie langer kan inhou nie.

"Ons moes haar veilig hou, en stil. Toe trek ons en sê vir almal sy's sieklik. My ma het haar opgepas en haar kalm en gelukkig probeer hou.

"*Ek* was haar gunsteling," sê hy en terwyl hy dit sê, is dit asof daar 'n vuil skoolseun tussen Aberforth se plooie en gekoekte baard uitloer. "Nie Albus nie, hy was altyd bo in sy kamer as hy by die huis was, besig om sy boeke te lees en sy pryse te tel, en sy korrespondensie op datum te hou met 'die mees gerekende towername van die oomblik'," sê Aberforth smalend, "*hy* wou nooit iets met haar te doen gehad het nie. Sy't die meeste van my gehou. Ek kon haar sover kry om te eet toe my ma nie kon nie, ek kon haar laat bedaar as sy 'n woedeaanval gehad het, en wanneer sy stil was, het sy my gehelp om die bokke kos te gee.

"En toe, toe sy veertien was . . . ek was nie daar nie, sien," sê

Aberforth, "as ek daar was, sou ek haar kon kalmeer. Sy het weer een van haar bevliegings gekry en my ma was nie so jonk soos sy nie en . . . Dit was 'n ongeluk. Ariana kon dit nie beheer nie. Maar my ma is dood."

Harry voel 'n aaklige mengsel van jammerte en afsku; hy wil nie meer hoor nie, maar Aberforth hou aan praat en Harry wonder hoe lank laas hy hieroor gepraat het, indien ooit.

"So toe was Albus se reis om die wêreld saam met klein Doge na die maan. Hulle twee het na my ma se begrafnis toe gekom en toe's Doge alleen weg en Albus het die hoof van die gesin geword. Ha!" Aberforth spoeg in die vuur.

"Ek kon na haar gekyk het, ek het dit vir hom gesê, ek het nie van skoolgaan gehou nie, ek sou by die huis gebly en dit gedoen het. Hy't vir my gesê ek moet eers klaar leer en *hy* het by my ma oorgeneem. Bietjie van 'n terugslag vir Meneer Briljant, jy wen nie pryse as jy jou halfmal suster oppas en elke tweede dag moet keer dat sy die huis opblaas nie. Maar dit het 'n paar weke lank oukei gegaan . . . tot hy gekom het."

En nou verskyn daar 'n geweldig gevaarlike uitdrukking op Aberforth se gesig.

"Grindelwald. My broer het uiteindelik 'n *gelyke* gehad om mee te gesels, iemand wat net so slim en talentvol soos *hy* was. Toe het Ariana se oppassery tweede gekom, want hulle het heeltyd gekonkel, planne gemaak vir 'n nuwe towerorde, en gesoek na kastige *Skatte*, en wat ook al die ander goed was waarin hulle so belang gestel het. Groot planne waarby die hele towerwêreld sal baat, en as een jong meisietjie afgeskeep word, wat maak dit saak, want Albus beywer hom mos vir *almal se beswil!*

"Maar ná 'n paar weke daarvan het ek genoeg gehad, meer as genoeg. Dit was amper tyd vir my om terug Hogwarts toe te gaan, dus sê ek toe vir hulle, al twee, in hulle gesigte, soos ek nou met julle praat," en Aberforth kyk af na Harry, en dit kos min verbeelding om hom as tiener te sien, seningrig en kwaad, besig om sy ouer broer te konfronteer. "Ek het vir hom gesê, jy beter nou hiervan vergeet. Jy kan haar nie hier wegneem nie, sy sal dit nie kan vat nie, jy kan haar nie saam met jou neem nie, waar jy ook al beplan om heen te gaan, wanneer jy jou slim toesprake hou en mense probeer opsweep om julle volgelinge te word. Hy't niks daarvan gehou nie," sê Aberforth en sy oë word 'n oomblik lank deur die vuur se lig op sy bril se lense afgeskerm: hulle skyn weer wit en blind. "Grindelwald het niks daarvan gehou nie. Hy het kwaad geword. Hy het vir my gesê ek's 'n simpel klein seuntjie wat in hom en my briljante

broer se pad probeer staan . . . Kan ek nie *verstaan* my arme suster sal nie meer weggesteek *hoef* te word wanneer hulle die wêreld verander het en die towenaars uit hule skuilplekke gelei en die Moggels op hulle plek gesit het nie?

"En toe is daar 'n stryery . . . en ek pluk my towerstaf uit en hy pluk syne uit, en toe gebruik my broer se beste vriend die Cruciatusvloek op my – en Albus probeer hom keer, en toe baklei al drie van ons en die flikkerende ligte en die knalle laat haar knak, sy kon dit nie vat nie –"

Die kleur dreineer uit Aberforth se gesig asof hy dodelik beseer is.

"– en ek dink sy wou help, maar sy't nie regtig geweet wat sy doen nie, en ek weet nie wie van ons het dit gedoen nie, dit kon enigeen van ons gewees het – en toe is sy dood."

Sy stem breek op die laaste woord en hy val in die naaste stoel neer. Hermione se gesig is nat van die trane en Ron is amper so bleek soos Aberforth. Harry voel net walging: hy wens hy het dit nie gehoor nie, wens hy kan sy kop reinig.

"Ek is so . . . ek is so jammer," fluister Hermione.

"Weg," sê Aberforth skor. "Vir altyd weg."

Hy vee sy neus aan sy mou se boordjie af en maak keel skoon.

"Grindelwald het hom natuurlik uit die voete gemaak. Hy't al klaar 'n bietjie van 'n reputasie daar oorkant in sy land gehad, en hy wou Ariana nie ook op sy kerfstok hê nie. En Albus was vry, of hoe? Vry van die las van sy suster, vry om te bewys hy's die grootste towenaar van die –"

"Hy was nooit vry nie," sê Harry.

"Ekskuus?" sê Aberforth.

"Nooit nie," sê Harry. "Die nag toe jou broer dood is, het hy 'n towerdrankie gedrink wat hom van sy verstand af gedryf het. Hy het begin skree, gepleit by iemand wat nie daar was nie. *'Moenie hulle seermaak nie, asseblief . . . Maak my eerder seer.'* "

Ron en Hermione staar na Harry. Hy het nog nooit vertel presies wat op die eiland in die meer gebeur het nie: die gebeure ná hy en Dumbledore teruggekeer het Hogwarts toe het dit so geheel en al oorskadu.

"Hy het gedink hy is weer terug daar by julle en Grindelwald, ek weet hy het," sê Harry en onthou hoe Dumbledore gekerm en gepleit het. "Hy't gedink hy kyk hoe Grindelwald jou en Ariana seermaak . . . Dit was vir hom 'n marteling, as jy hom toe kon gesien het, sou jy nie gesê het hy was vry nie."

Aberforth is nou verdiep in 'n studie van sy knopperige hande

vol blou are. Ná 'n lang pouse sê hy: "Hoe kan jy seker wees, Potter, dat my broer nie meer in almal se beswil belang gestel het as in jou nie? Hoe kan jy seker wees jy is nie ontbeerlik nie, net soos my klein sussie?"

Dit is asof 'n ysskerf Harry se hart deurboor.

"Ek glo dit nie. Dumbledore was lief vir Harry," sê Hermione.

"Hoekom het hy dan nie vir hom gesê om iewers te skuil nie?" kap Aberforth terug. "Hoekom het hy nie vir hom gesê om na homself te kyk en hom gewys hoe om dit te doen nie?"

"Want," sê Harry voor Hermione kan antwoord, "partykeer *moet* jy aan meer as net jou eie veiligheid dink! Partykeer *moet* jy doen wat vir almal se beswil is! Dis 'n oorlog hierdie!"

"Jy's sewentien, seun!"

"Ek's mondig en ek gaan aanhou baklei, selfs al het jy oorgegee!"

"Wie sê ek het oorgegee?"

" 'Die Orde van die Feniks is in sy peetjie,' " herhaal Harry. " 'Jy-Weet-Wie het gewen, dis verby, en enigiemand wat maak of dit nie so is nie, bedrieg homself.' "

"Ek sê nie ek hou daarvan nie, maar dis die waarheid!"

"Nee, dit is nie," sê Harry. "Jou broer het geweet hoe om met Jy-Weet-Wie af te reken en hy het daardie kennis aan my oorgedra. Ek gaan aanhou tot ek dit regkry – of doodgaan. Moenie dink ek weet nie hoe dit alles kan eindig nie. Ek weet dit al jare lank."

Hy wag dat Aberforth hom uitlag of met hom argumenteer, maar dit gebeur nie. Hy kyk Harry net suur aan.

"Ons moet by Hogwarts inkom," sê Harry weer. "As jy ons nie kan help nie, sal ons tot dagbreek wag, jou dan in vrede los en self 'n manier probeer kry. As jy ons *kan* help – wel, nou sal 'n goeie tyd wees om so te sê."

Aberforth bly roerloos in sy stoel sit en staar na Harry met die oë wat so buitengewoon baie soos sy broer s'n lyk. Oplaas maak hy keel skoon, staan op en stap om die tafeltjie tot voor Ariana se portret.

"Jy weet wat om te doen," sê hy.

Sy glimlag, draai om en loop weg, nie soos mense in portrette gewoonlik maak, by die raam uit nie, maar af met wat lyk soos 'n lang tonnel wat agter haar geskilder is. Hulle kyk hoe haar tenger figuur al kleiner word tot die duisternis haar uiteindelik insluk.

"E – wat –?" begin Ron.

"Daar is nou net een pad in," sê Aberforth. "Julle weet seker al die ou geheime gange word aan albei kante bewaak. Volgens my bronne is daar Dementors reg rondom op die grensmure en ge-

reelde patrollies binne die skool. Die plek is nog nooit so swaar bewaak nie. Ek weet nie hoe jy dink jy gaan enigiets kan doen as jy eers binne is nie, met Snape in bevel en die Carrows as sy Onderhoofde . . . Wel, dis jou saak, nè? Jy sê mos jy's bereid om dood te gaan."

"Maar wat . . .?" sê Hermione en kyk fronsend na Ariana se skildery.

'n Klein wit kolletjie het weer aan die einde van die geskilderde tonnel verskyn en Ariana loop nou terug na hulle toe en word al groter en groter soos sy nader kom. Maar daar is nou iemand anders by haar, iemand wat langer as sy is, wat mank loop en opgewonde lyk. Sy hare is langer as wat Harry dit nog ooit gesien het, dit lyk of daar 'n hele paar snye aan sy gesig is en sy klere is verslete en geskeur. Die twee figure word groter en groter totdat net hulle koppe en skouers die portret vul. Dan swaai die hele ding vorentoe soos 'n deurtjie in die muur en hulle sien die tonnel se ingang. En met sy te lang hare, sy gesnyde gesig en sy geskeurde kleed klim die regte Neville Longbottom uit. Hy gil van vreugde, spring van die kaggelrak af en roep uit: "Ek het geweet jy sal kom! *Ek het dit geweet, Harry!*"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



THE LOST DIADEM

"Neville — what the — how — ?"

But Neville had spotted Ron and Hermione, and with yells of delight was hugging them too. The longer Harry looked at Neville, the worse he appeared: One of his eyes was swollen yellow and purple, there were gouge marks on his face, and his general air of unkemptness suggested that he had been living rough. Nevertheless, his battered visage shone with happiness as he let go of Hermione and said again, "I knew you'd come! Kept telling Seamus it was a matter of time!"

"Neville, what's happened to you?"

"What? This?" Neville dismissed his injuries with a shake of the head. "This is nothing. Seamus is worse. You'll see. Shall we get

going then? Oh," he turned to Aberforth, "Ab, there might be a couple more people on the way."

"Couple more?" repeated Aberforth ominously. "What d'you mean, a couple more, Longbottom? There's a curfew and a Caterwauling Charm on the whole village!"

"I know, that's why they'll be Apparating directly into the bar," said Neville. "Just send them down the passage when they get here, will you? Thanks a lot."

Neville held out his hand to Hermione and helped her to climb up onto the mantelpiece and into the tunnel; Ron followed, then Neville. Harry addressed Aberforth.

"I don't know how to thank you. You've saved our lives twice."

"Look after 'em, then," said Aberforth gruffly. "I might not be able to save 'em a third time."

Harry clambered up onto the mantelpiece and through the hole behind Ariana's portrait. There were smooth stone steps on the other side: It looked as though the passageway had been there for years. Brass lamps hung from the walls and the earthy floor was worn and smooth; as they walked, their shadows rippled, fanlike, across the wall.

"How long's this been here?" Ron asked as they set off. "It isn't on the Marauder's Map, is it, Harry? I thought there were only seven passages in and out of school?"

"They sealed off all of those before the start of the year," said Neville. "There's no chance of getting through any of them now, not with curses over the entrances and Death Eaters and dementors waiting at the exits." He started walking backward, beaming,

drinking them in. "Never mind that stuff . . . Is it true? Did you break into Gringotts? Did you escape on a dragon? It's everywhere, everyone's talking about it, Terry Boot got beaten up by Carrow for yelling about it in the Great Hall at dinner!"

"Yeah, it's true," said Harry.

Neville laughed gleefully.

"What did you do with the dragon?"

"Released it into the wild," said Ron. "Hermione was all for keeping it as a pet —"

"Don't exaggerate, Ron —"

"But what have you been doing? People have been saying you've just been on the run, Harry, but I don't think so. I think you've been up to something."

"You're right," said Harry, "but tell us about Hogwarts, Neville, we haven't heard anything."

"It's been . . . well, it's not really like Hogwarts anymore," said Neville, the smile fading from his face as he spoke. "Do you know about the Carrows?"

"Those two Death Eaters who teach here?"

"They do more than teach," said Neville. "They're in charge of all discipline. They like punishment, the Carrows."

"Like Umbridge?"

"Nah, they make her look tame. The other teachers are all supposed to refer us to the Carrows if we do anything wrong. They don't, though, if they can avoid it. You can tell they all hate them as much as we do.

"Amycus, the bloke, he teaches what used to be Defense Against

the Dark Arts, except now it's just the Dark Arts. We're supposed to practice the Cruciatus Curse on people who've earned detentions —"

"What?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione's united voices echoed up and down the passage.

"Yeah," said Neville. "That's how I got this one," he pointed at a particularly deep gash in his cheek, "I refused to do it. Some people are into it, though; Crabbe and Goyle love it. First time they've ever been top in anything, I expect.

"Alecto, Amycus's sister, teaches Muggle Studies, which is compulsory for everyone. We've all got to listen to her explain how Muggles are like animals, stupid and dirty, and how they drove wizards into hiding by being vicious toward them, and how the natural order is being reestablished. I got this one," he indicated another slash to his face, "for asking her how much Muggle blood she and her brother have got."

"Blimey, Neville," said Ron, "there's a time and a place for getting a smart mouth."

"You didn't hear her," said Neville. "You wouldn't have stood it either. The thing is, it helps when people stand up to them, it gives everyone hope. I used to notice that when you did it, Harry."

"But they've used you as a knife sharpener," said Ron, wincing slightly as they passed a lamp and Neville's injuries were thrown into even greater relief.

Neville shrugged.

"Doesn't matter. They don't want to spill too much pure blood, so they'll torture us a bit if we're mouthy but they won't actually kill

us."

Harry did not know what was worse, the things that Neville was saying or the matter-of-fact tone in which he said them.

"The only people in real danger are the ones whose friends and relatives on the outside are giving trouble. They get taken hostage. Old Xeno Lovegood was getting a bit too outspoken in *The Quibbler*, so they dragged Luna off the train on the way back for Christmas."

"Neville, she's all right, we've seen her —"

"Yeah, I know, she managed to get a message to me."

From his pocket he pulled a golden coin, and Harry recognized it as one of the fake Galleons that Dumbledore's Army had used to send one another messages.

"These have been great," said Neville, beaming at Hermione. "The Carrows never rumbled how we were communicating, it drove them mad. We used to sneak out at night and put graffiti on the walls: *Dumbledore's Army, Still Recruiting*, stuff like that. Snape hated it."

"You *used to*?" said Harry, who had noticed the past tense.

"Well, it got more difficult as time went on," said Neville. "We lost Luna at Christmas, and Ginny never came back after Easter, and the three of us were sort of the leaders. The Carrows seemed to know I was behind a lot of it, so they started coming down on me hard, and then Michael Corner went and got caught releasing a first-year they'd chained up, and they tortured him pretty badly. That scared people off."

"No kidding," muttered Ron, as the passage began to slope upward.

"Yeah, well, I couldn't ask people to go through what Michael did,

so we dropped those kinds of stunts. But we were still fighting, doing underground stuff, right up until a couple of weeks ago. That's when they decided there was only one way to stop me, I suppose, and they went for Gran."

"They *what*?" said Harry, Ron, and Hermione together.

"Yeah," said Neville, panting a little now, because the passage was climbing so steeply, "well, you can see their thinking. It had worked really well, kidnapping kids to force their relatives to behave, I s'pose it was only a matter of time before they did it the other way around. Thing was," he faced them, and Harry was astonished to see that he was grinning, "they bit off a bit more than they could chew with Gran. Little old witch living alone, they probably thought they didn't need to send anyone particularly powerful. Anyway," Neville laughed, "Dawlish is still in St. Mungo's and Gran's on the run. She sent me a letter," he clapped a hand to the breast pocket of his robes, "telling me she was proud of me, that I'm my parents' son, and to keep it up."

"Cool," said Ron.

"Yeah," said Neville happily. "Only thing was, once they realized they had no hold over me, they decided Hogwarts could do without me after all. I don't know whether they were planning to kill me or send me to Azkaban; either way, I knew it was time to disappear."

"But," said Ron, looking thoroughly confused, "aren't — aren't we heading straight back into Hogwarts?"

"'Course," said Neville. "You'll see. We're here."

They turned a corner and there ahead of them was the end of the passage. Another short flight of steps led to a door just like the one

hidden behind Ariana's portrait. Neville pushed it open and climbed through. As Harry followed, he heard Neville call out to unseen people:

"Look who it is! Didn't I tell you?"

As Harry emerged into the room beyond the passage, there were several screams and yells: "HARRY!" "It's Potter, it's POTTER!" "Ron!" *"Hermione!"*

He had a confused impression of colored hangings, of lamps and many faces. The next moment, he, Ron, and Hermione were engulfed, hugged, pounded on the back, their hair ruffled, their hands shaken, by what seemed to be more than twenty people: They might just have won a Quidditch final.

"Okay, okay, calm down!" Neville called, and as the crowd backed away, Harry was able to take in their surroundings.

He did not recognize the room at all. It was enormous, and looked rather like the interior of a particularly sumptuous tree house, or perhaps a gigantic ship's cabin. Multicolored hammocks were strung from the ceiling and from a balcony that ran around the dark wood-paneled and windowless walls, which were covered in bright tapestry hangings: Harry saw the gold Gryffindor lion, emblazoned on scarlet; the black badger of Hufflepuff, set against yellow; and the bronze eagle of Ravenclaw, on blue. The silver and green of Slytherin alone were absent. There were bulging bookcases, a few broomsticks propped against the walls, and in the corner, a large wooden-cased wireless.

"Where are we?"

"Room of Requirement, of course!" said Neville. "Surpassed

itself, hasn't it? The Carrows were chasing me, and I knew I had just one chance for a hideout: I managed to get through the door and this is what I found! Well, it wasn't exactly like this when I arrived, it was a load smaller, there was only one hammock and just Gryffindor hangings. But it's expanded as more and more of the D.A. have arrived."

"And the Carrows can't get in?" asked Harry, looking around for the door.

"No," said Seamus Finnigan, whom Harry had not recognized until he spoke: Seamus's face was bruised and puffy. "It's a proper hideout, as long as one of us stays in here, they can't get at us, the door won't open. It's all down to Neville. He really *gets* this room. You've got to ask it for *exactly* what you need — like, 'I don't want any Carrow supporters to be able to get in' — and it'll do it for you! You've just got to make sure you close the loopholes! Neville's the man!"

"It's quite straightforward, really," said Neville modestly. "I'd been in here about a day and a half, and getting really hungry, and wishing I could get something to eat, and that's when the passage to the Hog's Head opened up. I went through it and met Aberforth. He's been providing us with food, because for some reason, that's the one thing the room doesn't really do."

"Yeah, well, food's one of the five exceptions to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration," said Ron to general astonishment.

"So we've been hiding out here for nearly two weeks," said Seamus, "and it just makes more hammocks every time we need them, and it even sprouted a pretty good bathroom once girls started turning

up —”

“— and thought they’d quite like to wash, yes,” supplied Lavender Brown, whom Harry had not noticed until that point. Now that he looked around properly, he recognized many familiar faces. Both Patil twins were there, as were Terry Boot, Ernie Macmillan, Anthony Goldstein, and Michael Corner.

“Tell us what you’ve been up to, though,” said Ernie. “There’ve been so many rumors, we’ve been trying to keep up with you on *Potterwatch*.” He pointed at the wireless. “You didn’t break into Gringotts?”

“They did!” said Neville. “And the dragon’s true too!”

There was a smattering of applause and a few whoops; Ron took a bow.

“What were you after?” asked Seamus eagerly.

Before any of them could parry the question with one of their own, Harry felt a terrible, scorching pain in the lightning scar. As he turned his back hastily on the curious and delighted faces, the Room of Requirement vanished, and he was standing inside a ruined stone shack, and the rotting floorboards were ripped apart at his feet, a disinterred golden box lay open and empty beside the hole, and Voldemort’s scream of fury vibrated inside his head.

With an enormous effort he pulled out of Voldemort’s mind again, back to where he stood, swaying, in the Room of Requirement, sweat pouring from his face and Ron holding him up.

“Are you all right, Harry?” Neville was saying. “Want to sit down? I expect you’re tired, aren’t — ?”

“No,” said Harry. He looked at Ron and Hermione, trying to tell

them without words that Voldemort had just discovered the loss of one of the other Horcruxes. Time was running out fast: If Voldemort chose to visit Hogwarts next, they would miss their chance.

"We need to get going," he said, and their expressions told him that they understood.

"What are we going to do, then, Harry?" asked Seamus. "What's the plan?"

"Plan?" repeated Harry. He was exercising all his willpower to prevent himself succumbing again to Voldemort's rage: His scar was still burning. "Well, there's something we — Ron, Hermione, and I — need to do, and then we'll get out of here."

Nobody was laughing or whooping anymore. Neville looked confused.

"What d'you mean, 'get out of here'?"

"We haven't come back to stay," said Harry, rubbing his scar, trying to soothe the pain. "There's something important we need to do —"

"What is it?"

"I — I can't tell you."

There was a ripple of muttering at this: Neville's brows contracted.

"Why can't you tell us? It's something to do with fighting You-Know-Who, right?"

"Well, yeah —"

"Then we'll help you."

The other members of Dumbledore's Army were nodding, some enthusiastically, others solemnly. A couple of them rose from their

chairs to demonstrate their willingness for immediate action.

"You don't understand." Harry seemed to have said that a lot in the last few hours. "We — we can't tell you. We've got to do it — alone."

"Why?" asked Neville.

"Because . . ." In his desperation to start looking for the missing Horcrux, or at least to have a private discussion with Ron and Hermione about where they might commence their search, Harry found it difficult to gather his thoughts. His scar was still searing. "Dumbledore left the three of us a job," he said carefully, "and we weren't supposed to tell — I mean, he wanted us to do it, just the three of us."

"We're his army," said Neville. "Dumbledore's Army. We were all in it together, we've been keeping it going while you three have been off on your own —"

"It hasn't exactly been a picnic, mate," said Ron.

"I never said it had, but I don't see why you can't trust us. Everyone in this room's been fighting and they've been driven in here because the Carrows were hunting them down. Everyone in here's proven they're loyal to Dumbledore — loyal to you."

"Look," Harry began, without knowing what he was going to say, but it did not matter: The tunnel door had just opened behind him.

"We got your message, Neville! Hello you three, I thought you must be here!"

It was Luna and Dean. Seamus gave a great roar of delight and ran to hug his best friend.

"Hi, everyone!" said Luna happily. "Oh, it's great to be back!"

“Luna,” said Harry distractedly, “what are you doing here? How did you — ?”

“I sent for her,” said Neville, holding up the fake Galleon. “I promised her and Ginny that if you turned up I’d let them know. We all thought that if you came back, it would mean revolution. That we were going to overthrow Snape and the Carrows.”

“Of course that’s what it means,” said Luna brightly. “Isn’t it, Harry? We’re going to fight them out of Hogwarts?”

“Listen,” said Harry with a rising sense of panic, “I’m sorry, but that’s not what we came back for. There’s something we’ve got to do, and then —”

“You’re going to leave us in this mess?” demanded Michael Corner.

“No!” said Ron. “What we’re doing will benefit everyone in the end, it’s all about trying to get rid of You-Know-Who —”

“Then let us help!” said Neville angrily. “We want to be a part of it!”

There was another noise behind them, and Harry turned. His heart seemed to fail: Ginny was now climbing through the hole in the wall, closely followed by Fred, George, and Lee Jordan. Ginny gave Harry a radiant smile: He had forgotten, or had never fully appreciated, how beautiful she was, but he had never been less pleased to see her.

“Aberforth’s getting a bit annoyed,” said Fred, raising his hand in answer to several cries of greeting. “He wants a kip, and his bar’s turned into a railway station.”

Harry’s mouth fell open. Right behind Lee Jordan came Harry’s old girlfriend, Cho Chang. She smiled at him.

"I got the message," she said, holding up her own fake Galleon, and she walked over to sit beside Michael Corner.

"So what's the plan, Harry?" said George.

"There isn't one," said Harry, still disoriented by the sudden appearance of all these people, unable to take everything in while his scar was still burning so fiercely.

"Just going to make it up as we go along, are we? My favorite kind," said Fred.

"You've got to stop this!" Harry told Neville. "What did you call them all back for? This is insane —"

"We're fighting, aren't we?" said Dean, taking out his fake Galleon. "The message said Harry was back, and we were going to fight! I'll have to get a wand, though —"

"You haven't got a *wand* — ?" began Seamus.

Ron turned suddenly to Harry.

"Why can't they help?"

"What?"

"They can help." He dropped his voice and said, so that none of them could hear but Hermione, who stood between them, "We don't know where it is. We've got to find it fast. We don't have to tell them it's a Horcrux."

Harry looked from Ron to Hermione, who murmured, "I think Ron's right. We don't even know what we're looking for, we need them." And when Harry looked unconvinced, "You don't have to do everything alone, Harry."

Harry thought fast, his scar still prickling, his head threatening to split again. Dumbledore had warned him against telling anyone but

Ron and Hermione about the Horcruxes. *Secrets and lies, that's how we grew up, and Albus . . . he was a natural. . . .* Was he turning into Dumbledore, keeping his secrets clutched to his chest, afraid to trust? But Dumbledore had trusted Snape, and where had that led? To murder at the top of the highest tower . . .

"All right," he said quietly to the other two. "Okay," he called to the room at large, and all noise ceased: Fred and George, who had been cracking jokes for the benefit of those nearest, fell silent, and all of them looked alert, excited.

"There's something we need to find," Harry said. "Something — something that'll help us overthrow You-Know-Who. It's here at Hogwarts, but we don't know where. It might have belonged to Ravenclaw. Has anyone heard of an object like that? Has anyone ever come across something with her eagle on it, for instance?"

He looked hopefully toward the little group of Ravenclaws, to Padma, Michael, Terry, and Cho, but it was Luna who answered, perched on the arm of Ginny's chair.

"Well, there's her lost diadem. I told you about it, remember, Harry? The lost diadem of Ravenclaw? Daddy's trying to duplicate it."

"Yeah, but the lost diadem," said Michael Corner, rolling his eyes, "is *lost,* Luna. That's sort of the point."

"When was it lost?" asked Harry.

"Centuries ago, they say," said Cho, and Harry's heart sank. "Professor Flitwick says the diadem vanished with Ravenclaw herself. People have looked, but," she appealed to her fellow Ravenclaws, "nobody's ever found a trace of it, have they?"

They all shook their heads.

"Sorry, but what *is* a diadem?" asked Ron.

"It's a kind of crown," said Terry Boot. "Ravenclaw's was supposed to have magical properties, enhance the wisdom of the wearer."

"Yes, Daddy's Wrackspurt siphons —"

But Harry cut across Luna.

"And none of you have ever seen anything that looks like it?"

They all shook their heads again. Harry looked at Ron and Hermione and his own disappointment was mirrored back at him. An object that had been lost this long, and apparently without trace, did not seem like a good candidate for the Horcrux hidden in the castle. . . . Before he could formulate a new question, however, Cho spoke again.

"If you'd like to see what the diadem's supposed to look like, I could take you up to our common room and show you, Harry? Ravenclaw's wearing it in her statue."

Harry's scar scorched again: For a moment the Room of Requirement swam before him, and he saw instead the dark earth soaring beneath him and felt the great snake wrapped around his shoulders. Voldemort was flying again, whether to the underground lake or here, to the castle, he did not know: Either way, there was hardly any time left.

"He's on the move," he said quietly to Ron and Hermione. He glanced at Cho and then back at them. "Listen, I know it's not much of a lead, but I'm going to go and look at this statue, at least find out what the diadem looks like. Wait for me here and keep, you know —

the other one — safe."

Cho had got to her feet, but Ginny said rather fiercely, "No, Luna will take Harry, won't you, Luna?"

"Oooh, yes, I'd like to," said Luna happily, and Cho sat down again, looking disappointed.

"How do we get out?" Harry asked Neville.

"Over here."

He led Harry and Luna to a corner, where a small cupboard opened onto a steep staircase.

"It comes out somewhere different every day, so they've never been able to find it," he said. "Only trouble is, we never know exactly where we're going to end up when we go out. Be careful, Harry, they're always patrolling the corridors at night."

"No problem," said Harry. "See you in a bit."

He and Luna hurried up the staircase, which was long, lit by torches, and turned corners in unexpected places. At last they reached what appeared to be solid wall.

"Get under here," Harry told Luna, pulling out the Invisibility Cloak and throwing it over both of them. He gave the wall a little push.

It melted away at his touch and they slipped outside: Harry glanced back and saw that it had resealed itself at once. They were standing in a dark corridor: Harry pulled Luna back into the shadows, fumbled in the pouch around his neck, and took out the Marauder's Map. Holding it close to his nose he searched, and located his and Luna's dots at last.

"We're up on the fifth floor," he whispered, watching Filch moving

away from them, a corridor ahead. “Come on, this way.”

They crept off.

Harry had prowled the castle at night many times before, but never had his heart hammered this fast, never had so much depended on his safe passage through the place. Through squares of moonlight upon the floor, past suits of armor whose helmets creaked at the sound of their soft footsteps, around corners beyond which who knew what lurked, Harry and Luna walked, checking the Marauder’s Map whenever light permitted, twice pausing to allow a ghost to pass without drawing attention to themselves. He expected to encounter an obstacle at any moment; his worst fear was Peeves, and he strained his ears with every step to hear the first, telltale signs of the poltergeist’s approach.

“This way, Harry,” breathed Luna, plucking his sleeve and pulling him toward a spiral staircase.

They climbed in tight, dizzying circles; Harry had never been up here before. At last they reached a door. There was no handle and no keyhole: nothing but a plain expanse of aged wood, and a bronze knocker in the shape of an eagle.

Luna reached out a pale hand, which looked eerie floating in midair, unconnected to arm or body. She knocked once, and in the silence it sounded to Harry like a cannon blast. At once the beak of the eagle opened, but instead of a bird’s call, a soft, musical voice said, “Which came first, the phoenix or the flame?”

“Hmm . . . What do you think, Harry?” said Luna, looking thoughtful.

“What? Isn’t there just a password?”

“Oh no, you’ve got to answer a question,” said Luna.

“What if you get it wrong?”

“Well, you have to wait for somebody who gets it right,” said Luna. “That way you learn, you see?”

“Yeah . . . Trouble is, we can’t really afford to wait for anyone else, Luna.”

“No, I see what you mean,” said Luna seriously. “Well then, I think the answer is that a circle has no beginning.”

“Well reasoned,” said the voice, and the door swung open.

The deserted Ravenclaw common room was a wide, circular room, airier than any Harry had ever seen at Hogwarts. Graceful arched windows punctuated the walls, which were hung with blue-and-bronze silks: By day, the Ravenclaws would have a spectacular view of the surrounding mountains. The ceiling was domed and painted with stars, which were echoed in the midnight-blue carpet. There were tables, chairs, and bookcases, and in a niche opposite the door stood a tall statue of white marble.

Harry recognized Rowena Ravenclaw from the bust he had seen at Luna’s house. The statue stood beside a door that led, he guessed, to dormitories above. He strode right up to the marble woman, and she seemed to look back at him with a quizzical half smile on her face, beautiful yet slightly intimidating. A delicate-looking circlet had been reproduced in marble on top of her head. It was not unlike the tiara Fleur had worn at her wedding. There were tiny words etched into it. Harry stepped out from under the Cloak and climbed up onto Ravenclaw’s plinth to read them.

“‘Wit beyond measure is man’s greatest treasure.’”

“Which makes you pretty skint, witless,” said a cackling voice.

Harry whirled around, slipped off the plinth, and landed on the floor. The sloping-shouldered figure of Alecto Carrow was standing before him, and even as Harry raised his wand, she pressed a stubby forefinger to the skull and snake branded on her forearm.

Die Verlore Diadeem

"Neville – wat de – hoe –?"

Maar Neville sien Ron en Hermione en omhels hulle ook met 'n uitroep van van vreugde. Hoe langer Harry na Neville kyk, hoe erger lyk hy: een van sy oë is opgeswel, geel en pers, daar is diep kepe in sy gesig, en sy algemene onversorgdheid maak dit duidelik dat hy 'n moeilike tyd agter die rug het. Nogtans straal sy gehawende gelaat van blydskap toe hy Hermione los en weer sê: "Ek het geweet jy sal kom! Ek het heeltyd vir Seamus gesê dis net 'n kwessie van tyd!"

"Neville, wat het met jou gebeur?"

"Wat? Dit?" Neville maak sy beserings kopskuddend af. "Dit is niks nie. Seamus lyk baie erger. Julle sal sien. Sal ons waai? O," hy draai na Aberforth, "Ab, daar's dalk nog 'n paar mense op pad."

"Nog 'n paar?" herhaal Aberforth onheilspellend. "Wat bedoel jy, nog 'n paar, Longbottom? Daar's 'n aandklokreël en 'n Kattegekermspreuk oor die hele dorp!"

"Ek weet, dis hoekom hulle direk in die kroeg sal Appareer," sê Neville. "Stuur hulle net by die gang af wanneer hulle hier aankom, oukei? Baie dankie."

Neville hou sy hand na Hermione uit en help haar om by die kaggelrak op en tot in die tonnel te klim; Ron volg, dan Neville. Harry spreek Aberforth aan.

"Ek weet nie hoe om vir jou dankie te sê nie. Jy't ons lewe gered, twee keer."

"Nou pas julle dan op," sê Aberforth stuurs. "Ek sal julle dalk nie 'n derde keer kan red nie."

Harry klouter tot op die kaggelrak en deur die opening agter Ariana se portret. Daar is gladde kliptreetjies aan die ander kant: dit lyk of die gang al jare lank daar is. Koperlampe hang teen die mure en die grondvloer is verweer en glad; terwyl hulle loop, riffel hulle skaduwees soos waaiers teen die muur.

"Hoe lank is dit al hier?" vra Ron. "Dis nie op die Plunderaar se

Kaart nie, is dit, Harry? Ek dog daar's net sewe gange in en uit by die skool?"

"Hulle het al daai voor die skool vanjaar begin het, verseël," sê Neville. "Daar's nie 'n manier om nou deur enige van hulle te kom nie, nie met die vloeke oor die ingange en Doodseters en Dementors wat by die uitgange wag nie." Hy begin agteruit loop, en drink hulle stralend in. "Maar vergeet van daai goed . . . Is dit waar? Het julle by Gringotts ingebreek? Het julle op 'n draak ontsnap? Dis oral, almal praat daaroor. Carrow het Terry Boot aangerand omdat hy dit met aandete hardop in die Groot Saal uitgelap het!"

"Ja, dis waar," sê Harry.

Neville lag lekker.

"Wat het julle met die draak gedoen?"

"Hom in die natuur losgelaat," sê Ron. "Hermione wou hom natuurlik as 'n troeteldier aanhou –"

"Moenie oordryf nie, Ron –"

"Maar wat het julle heeltyd gedoen? Mense sê julle was net op vlug, Harry, maar ek dink nie so nie. Ek dink julle was besig met iets."

"Jy's reg," sê Harry, "maar vertel ons van Hogwarts, Neville, ons weet niks van wat hier aangaan nie."

"Dis . . . wel, dis nie meer regtig soos Hogwarts nie," sê Neville en die glimlag op sy gesig vervaag terwyl hy praat. "Weet julle van die Carrows?"

"Daardie twee Doodseters wat hier skoolhou?"

"Hulle doen meer as skoolhou," sê Neville. "Hulle is in bevel van dissipline en die Carrows hou van straf."

"Nes Umbridge?"

"Nee, hulle laat haar mak lyk. Die ander onderwysers is almal veronderstel om ons na die Carrows toe te stuur as ons iets verkeerd doen, maar hulle doen dit nie as hulle dit kan verhelp nie. 'n Mens kan sien hulle haat die twee net soveel soos ons.

"Amycus, die ou, gee klas in wat eers Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste was, behalwe dat dit nou net die Donker Kunste is. Ons moet die Cruciatusvloek oefen op mense wat detensie gekry het –"

"*Wat?*"

Harry, Ron en Hermione se stemme eggo in 'n koor op en af in die gang.

"Ja," sê Neville. "Dis hoe ek dié een gekry het." Hy wys na 'n besonder diep sny op sy wang. "Ek het geweier om dit te doen. Maar party ouens geniet dit; Crabbe en Goyle is mal daaroor. Ek

veronderstel dis die eerste keer dat hulle ooit die beste in enigiets is."

"Alecto, Amycus se suster, gee klas in Moggelstudies, wat verpligtend vir almal is. Ons moet almal luister hoe sy verduidelik Moggels is soos diere, onnosel en vuil, en hoe hulle towenaars gedwing het om ondergronds te gaan deur wreed met hulle te wees, en hoe die natuurlike orde nou weer herstel gaan word. Ek het dié een gekry," hy wys na nog 'n sny in sy gesig, "omdat ek haar gevra het hoeveel Moggelbloed sy en haar broer het."

"Demmit, Neville," sê Ron, "daar's 'n tyd en 'n plek om jou slim te hou."

"Jy't haar nie gehoor nie," sê Neville. ""Jy sou dit ook nie kon vat nie. Die ding is, dit help as mense hulle verset, dit gee almal hoop. Ek het dit altyd agtergekom toe jy dit gedoen het, Harry."

"Maar hulle't die messe vir jou geslyp," sê Ron, wat effens gril toe hulle verby 'n lamp loop en Neville se beserings selfs nog meer uitstaan.

Neville haal sy skouers op.

"Maak nie saak nie. Hulle wil nie te veel suiwer bloed verspil nie, so hulle martel ons 'n bietjie as ons te astrant is, maar hulle sal ons nie regtig doodmaak nie."

Harry weet nie wat die ergste is nie: die dinge wat Neville sê of die traak-my-nieagtige manier waarop hy dit sê.

"Die enigste mense wat regtig in gevaar is, is dié wie se vriende en familie aan die buitekant moeilikheid maak. Hulle word as gyselaars aangehou. Ou Xeno Lovegood het 'n bietjie te uitgesproke geraak in *Die Vitter*, toe pluk hulle vir Luna van die trein af op pad huis toe vir Kersfees."

"Neville, sy's oukei, ons het haar gesien –"

"Ja, ek weet, sy't dit reggekry om vir my 'n boodskap te stuur."

Hy haal 'n goue munt uit sy sak en Harry herken dit as een van die vervalste Galjoene wat Dumbledore se Soldate gebruik het om vir mekaar boodskappe te stuur.

"Hierdie goed was wonderlik," sê Neville ingenome vir Hermione. "Die Carrows kon nooit uitvind hoe ons kommunikeer nie, dit het hulle mal gemaak. Ons het snags uitgeglip en graffiti op die mure geskryf: *Dumbledore se Soldate Werf Nog Steeds Lede*, sulke soort goed, Snape het dit gehaat."

"Julle *het* altyd?" vra Harry, wat agterkom hy gebruik die verlede tyd.

"Wel, dit het geleidelik al hoe moeiliker geword," sê Neville. "Ons het Luna met Kersfees verloor en Ginny het nie ná Pase

teruggekom nie en ons drie was soort van die leiers. Die Carrows moet geweet het ek sit agter baie van die dinge, so hulle het erg op my begin afklim, en toe word Michael Corner gevang toe hy 'n eerstejaartjie wat hulle vasgeketting het, help ontsnap, en hulle het hom nogal erg gemartel. Dit het mense groot laat skrik."

"Jy speel," mompel Ron terwyl die gang na bo begin loop.

"Ja, wel, ek kon nie van mense verwag om deur te maak wat Michael moes nie, so toe los ons daai dinge. Maar ons het nog steeds baklei, geheime goed gedoen, tot so 'n paar weke gelede. Ek veronderstel hulle't besluit daar's net een manier om my te stop, en toe gaan hulle vir Ouma."

"Hulle't *wat?*" vra Harry, Ron en Hermione tegelyk.

"Ja," sê Neville, wat nou effens uitasem is van die steil gang, "wel, 'n mens kan verstaan hoe hulle geredeneer het. Dit het baie goed gewerk om kinders te ontvoer om hulle familie te dwing om hulle te gedra, so ek veronderstel dit was net 'n kwessie van tyd voor hulle dit andersom ook sou doen. Die ding is," hy kyk na hulle en Harry is verbaas om te sien hy grinnik, "hulle het hulleself 'n bietjie oorskat met Ouma. 'n Klein ou heksie wat alleen lewe: hulle't natuurlik gedink hulle hoef nie 'n magtige persoon te stuur nie. In elk geval," lag Neville, "Dawlish is steeds in Sint Mungo en Ouma het gevlug. Sy't vir my 'n brief gestuur," hy sit 'n hand op sy kleed se borssak, "en gesê sy's trots op my en dat ek my ouers se seun is en moet volhard."

"Lekker," sê Ron.

"Ja," sê Neville vrolik. "Die enigste ding is, toe hulle besef hulle't nie meer 'n houvas op my nie, het hulle besluit Hogwarts kan miskien tog sonder my klaarkom. Ek het nie geweet of hulle beplan het om my dood te maak of my Azkaban toe te stuur nie, ek het net geweet dis tyd om te verdwyn."

"Maar," sê Ron en lyk heeltemal verward, "is – is ons nie reguit op pad terug Hogwarts toe nie?"

"'tuurlik," sê Neville. "Julle sal sien. Ons is hier."

Hulle gaan om 'n hoek en daar voor hulle is die einde van die gang. Nog 'n kort stel trappe lei na 'n deur soos die een wat agter Ariana se portret versteek is. Neville stoot dit oop en klim deur. Terwyl Harry volg, hoor hy hoe Neville vir iemand sê: "Kyk wie's dit! Ek het julle mos gesê!"

Toe Harry uit die gang in die vertrek verskyn, is daar verskeie uitroepe –

"HARRY!"

"Dis Potter, dis POTTER!"

"Ron!"

"Hermione!"

Hy kry 'n deurmekaar indruk van gekleurde muurbehangsels, lampe en baie gesigte. Die volgende oomblik word hy, Ron en Hermione oorval, vasgedruk, op die rug geklop, hulle hare deurmekaar gefrommel en hulle hande geskud deur wat na meer as twintig mense lyk: hulle kon net sowel 'n Kwiddiekeindwedstryd gewen het.

"Oukei, oukei, bedaar!" sê Neville hard en die klomp staan effens terug en Harry kan alles om hulle inneem.

Hy herken die vertrek glad nie. Dit is ontsaglik groot en lyk nogal soos die binnekant van 'n besonder weelderige boomhuis, of miskien 'n reusagtige skeepskajuit. Veelkleurige hangmatte hang van die plafon af en van 'n balkon wat reg rondom die vensterlose mure, wat bedek is met donker houtpanele, loop. Harry sien die goue Gryffindorleeu wat op skarlakenrooi pryk, Hoesenproes se swart dassie op geel, en Raweklou se brons arend, op blou. Net Slytherin se silwer en groen is afwesig. Daar is volgepropte boekrakke, 'n paar besemstokke wat teen die mure staangemaak is, en in die hoek is 'n groot radio in 'n houtkas.

"Waar is ons?"

"Die Vertrek van Vereistes, natuurlik!" sê Neville. "Hy't homself oortref, nè? Die Carrows het my gejaag en ek het geweet ek het net een kans vir 'n skuiling, toe kry ek dit reg om by die deur in te kom en dit is wat ek ontdek het! Wel, dit het nie presies so gelyk toe ek hier aankom nie, dit was baie kleiner, daar was slegs een hangmat en net Gryffindor-behangsels. Maar dit het al groter en groter geword soos meer DS-lede hier aangekom het."

"En die Carrows kan nie inkom nie?" vra Harry terwyl hy rondkyk en die deur soek.

"Nee," sê Seamus Finnigan, wat Harry eers herken noudat hy praat: Seamus se gesig is gekneus en opgeswel. "Dis 'n ordentlike skuiling, solank een van ons hierbinne bly, kan hulle ons nie kry nie, want die deur sal nie oopgaan nie. Dis alles Neville se werk. Hy *weet* hoe om met hierdie Vertrek te werk. Jy moet *presies* sê wat jy nodig het – soos: 'Ek wil nie hê enige Carrow-aanhangers moet hier kan inkom nie' – en hy sal dit vir jou doen! Jy moet net seker maak jy los nie iewers 'n skuiwergat nie! Neville is briljant!"

"Dis eintlik heel eenvoudig," sê Neville beskeie. "Ek was omtrent al 'n dag en 'n half hierbinne en het regtig honger begin raak en gewens ek kan iets te ete kry, en toe gaan die gang na die Swynenes oop. Ek is daardeur en het Aberforth ontmoet. Hy't heeltyd vir ons

kos gegee, want om die een of ander rede is dit die een ding wat die Vertrek nie doen nie."

"Ja, wel, kos is een van die vyf uitsonderings op Gamp se Wet van Elementêre Transfigurasie," sê Ron tot almal se verbasing.

"So, ons skuil nou al amper twee weke hier," sê Seamus, "en die Vertrek maak elke keer dat ons dit nodig het net nog meer hangmatte, en het selfs 'n heel skaflike badkamer laat opskiet toe hier meisies begin opdaag –"

"– en gedink het hulle sal nogal daarvan hou om te kan was, ja," las Lavender Brown by. Harry het haar tot dusver nog nie opgemerk nie. Noudat hy ordentlik rondkyk, herken hy baie gesigte. Die Patil-tweeling is daar, so ook Terry Boot, Ernie Macmillan, Anthony Goldstein en Michael Corner.

"Maar vertel vir ons wat julle aangevang het," sê Ernie. "Daar was soveel gerugte, ons het op *Potterparade* met julle probeer byhou." Hy wys na die radio. "Julle't tog nie regtig by Gringotts ingebreek nie?"

"Hulle het!" sê Neville. "En die draak is ook die waarheid!"

Daar word hier en daar hande geklap en gejuig; Ron ontvang die applous buigend.

"Wat het julle daar gaan soek?" vra Seamus gretig.

Voor enigeen van hulle die vraag met een van hulle eie kan afweer, voel Harry 'n verskriklike skroeipyn in die weerliglitteken. Terwyl hy sy rug vinnig op die nuuskierige, opgewonde gesigte draai, verdwyn die Vertrek van Vereistes en hy staan in 'n bouvallige klipkrot en die verrotte vloerplanke by sy voete is uitmekaar geruk en 'n goue boksie wat uitgegrawe is, lê oop en leeg langs die gat en Voldemort se brul van woede vibreer binne-in sy kop.

Met geweldige inspanning onttrek hy hom weer aan Voldemort se gedagtes en keer terug na waar hy wankelend in die Vertrek van Vereistes staan met sweet wat by sy gesig afloop en Ron wat hom regop hou.

"Is jy oukei, Harry?" vra Neville. "Wil jy sit? Jy's seker moeg, nè?"

"Nee," sê Harry. Hy kyk na Ron en Hermione en probeer sonder woorde vir hulle sê Voldemort het so pas ontdek hy het een van die ander Horcruxe verloor. Die tyd word nou vinnig minder: as Voldemort besluit om volgende Hogwarts toe te kom, sal hulle hul kans verbeur.

"Ons moet gaan," sê hy en hulle uitdrukkings sê vir hom hulle verstaan.

"So wat gaan ons doen, Harry?" vra Seamus. "Wat is die plan?"

"Plan?" herhaal Harry. Hy gebruik al sy wilskrag om te keer dat

hy weer voor Voldemort se woede swig: sy litteken brand steeds. "Wel, daar's iets wat ons – ek, Ron en Hermione – moet doen, en dan kan ons hier padgee."

Niemand lag of juig meer nie. Neville lyk verward.

"Wat bedoel jy, 'hier padgee'?"

"Ons het nie teruggekom om te bly nie," sê Harry en vryf sy litteken om die pyn te probeer verlig. "Daar's iets belangriks wat ons moet doen –"

"Soos wat?"

"Ek – ek kan nie vir julle sê nie."

Daar is 'n borrelende gemompel. Neville se wenkbroue trek saam.

"Hoekom kan jy ons nie vertel nie? Dit het iets te doen met die stryd teen Jy-Weet-Wie, nè?"

"Wel, ja –"

"Dan sal ons julle help."

Die ander lede van Dumbledore se Soldate knik, party entoesiasties, party plegtig. 'n Paar staan uit hulle stoele op om te wys hulle is bereid om dadelik tot aksie oor te gaan.

"Julle verstaan nie." Dit voel vir Harry of hy dit die afgelope paar uur al baie gesê het. "Ons – ons kan nie vir julle vertel nie. Ons moet dit doen – alleen."

"Hoekom?" vra Neville.

"Omdat . . ." In sy desperaatheid om die vermiste Horcrux te begin soek, of om ten minste privaat met Ron en Hermione te kan gesels oor waar hulle met die soektog kan begin, is dit vir Harry moeilik om sy gedagtes agtermekaar te kry. Sy litteken skroei steeds. "Dumbledore het vir ons drie 'n taak nagelaat," sê hy versigtig, "en ons is nie veronderstel om te sê wat dit is nie – ek bedoel, hy wou hê ons moet dit doen, net ons drie."

"Ons is sy Soldate," sê Neville. "Dumbledore se Soldate. Ons is saam hierin, ons het dinge aan die gang gehou terwyl julle drie julle eie koers ingeslaan het –"

"Dit was allesbehalwe 'n piekniek, pel," sê Ron.

"Ek sê nie dit was nie, maar ek verstaan nie hoekom julle ons nie kan vertrou nie. Almal in hierdie Vertrek het vir hierdie saak baklei en is hierheen gedryf omdat die Carrows jag op hulle gemaak het. Almal hier het bewys hulle's lojaal aan Dumbledore – lojaal aan jou, Harry."

"Kyk," begin Harry sonder om te weet wat hy gaan sê, maar dit maak nie saak nie: die tonneldeur het so pas weer agter hom oopgegaan.

"Ons het jou boodskap gekry, Neville! Hallo, julle drie, ek het gedink julle gaan hier wees!"

Dit is Luna en Dean. Seamus brul van blydskap en hardloop om sy beste vriend te omhels.

"Haai, almal!" sê Luna vrolik. "O, dis wonderlik om terug te wees!"

"Luna," sê Harry verward, "wat doen jy hier? Hoe het jy –"

"Ek het haar laat kom," sê Neville en hou 'n vals Galjoen op. "Ek het haar en Ginny belowe as jy hier opdaag, sal ek hulle laat weet. Ons het almal gedink as jy terugkom, gaan daar 'n rewolusie wees. Dat ons Snape en die Carrows tot 'n val gaan bring."

"Natuurlik het ons dit gedink," sê Luna vrolik. "Of hoe, Harry? Ons gaan hulle mos hier by Hogwarts uitskop?"

"Luister," sê Harry met 'n stygende gevoel van paniek, "ek is jammer, maar dis nie waarvoor ons teruggekom het nie. Daar's iets wat ons moet doen, en dan –"

"Gaan julle ons in hierdie gemors los?" dring Michael Corner aan.

"Nee!" sê Ron. "Wat ons doen, gaan op die ou end vir almal se beswil wees, dit gaan alles daaroor dat ons van Jy-Weet-Wie probeer ontslae raak –"

"Nou laat ons julle dan help!" sê Neville kwaad. "Ons wil deel daarvan wees!"

Daar is nog 'n geluid agter hulle en Harry draai om. Sy hart gaan staan amper: Ginny klim deur die opening in die muur, met Fred, George en Lee Jordan kort op haar hakke. Ginny gee vir Harry 'n stralende glimlag: hy het vergeet, of nooit ten volle waardeer, hoe mooi sy is nie, maar hy was nog nooit minder bly om haar te sien nie.

"Aberforth raak 'n bietjie keelvol," sê Fred en lig sy hand in antwoord op verskeie uitroepe van verwelkoming. "Hy wil kiep, en sy kroeg het in 'n spoorwegstasie verander."

Harry se mond val oop. Reg agter Lee Jordan verskyn Harry se eks-meisie, Cho Chang. Sy glimlag vir hom.

"Ek het die boodskap gekry," sê sy, wys haar eie vals Galjoen en gaan sit langs Michael Corner.

"So wat's die plan, Harry?" vra George.

"Daar is nie een nie," sê Harry, steeds uit die veld geslaan oor al hierdie mense wat so skielik verskyn het, en nie in staat om alles in te neem terwyl die litteken so ontsettend brand nie.

"Maak dit net op soos ons aangaan? Dis die soort plan waarvan ek hou," sê Fred.

"Hou op hiermee!" sê Harry vir Neville. "Hoekom het jy hulle almal teruggeroep? Dis malligheid –"

"Ons gaan baklei, of hoe?" sê Dean en haal sy vals Galjoen uit. "Die boodskap het gesê Harry is terug en ons gaan baklei! Ek sal net eers 'n towerstaf moet kry –"

"Het jy nie 'n *towerstaf* nie –?" begin Seamus.

Ron draai skielik na Harry.

"Hoekom kan hulle nie help nie?"

"Wat?"

"Hulle kan help." Hy laat sak sy stem en sê sodat niemand anders as Hermione wat tussen hulle staan, kan hoor nie. "Ons weet nie waar dit is nie. Ons moet dit vinnig kry. Ons hoef nie vir hulle te sê dis 'n Horcrux nie."

Harry kyk van Ron na Hermione, wat sag sê: "Ek dink Ron is reg. Ons weet self nie eens waarna ons soek nie, ons het hulle nodig." En toe Harry nie oortuig lyk nie, voeg sy by: "Jy hoef nie alles alleen te doen nie, Harry."

Harry dink vinnig, sy litteken prik steeds, sy kop dreig weer om te bars. Dumbledore het hom gewaarsku om vir niemand behalwe Ron en Hermione van die Horcruxe te vertel nie. *Geheime en leuens, dis waarmee ons grootgeword het, en Albus . . . Hy was uitgeknip daarvoor* . . . Word hy nou soos Dumbledore wat sy geheime net vir homself gehou het en bang was om ander te vertrou? Maar Dumbledore het Snape vertrou en waarheen het dit gelei? Na moord hierbo op die hoogste toring . . .

"Nou goed," sê hy sag vir die ander twee. "Oukei," sê hy hard vir almal in die Vertrek en die gebabbel hou op: Fred en George, wat met die studente om hulle staan en grappies maak het, word stil en almal lyk gereed, opgewonde.

"Daar is iets wat ons moet kry," sê Harry. "Iets – iets wat ons sal help om Jy-Weet-Wie te verslaan. Dis hier by Hogwarts, maar ons weet nie waar nie. Dit kon dalk aan Raweklou behoort het. Het enigiemand so iets gesien? Het enigiemand byvoorbeeld ooit 'n voorwerp met 'n arend op raakgeloop?"

Hy kyk hoopvol na die klein groepie Rawekllouers, na Padma, Michael, Terry en Cho, maar dit is Luna wat antwoord waar sy op Ginny se stoel se armleuning sit.

"Wel, daar's haar verlore diadeem. Ek het jou daarvan vertel, onthou jy, Harry? Raweklou se verlore diadeem. Pappa is besig om dit te probeer dupliseer."

"Ja, maar die verlore diadeem," sê Michael Corner en rol sy oë, "is *weg*, Luna. Dis soort van die punt."

"Wanneer het dit weggeraak?" vra Harry.

"Glo eeue gelede," sê Cho, en Harry se hart sink in sy skoene. "Professor Flitwick sê die diadeem het saam met Raweklou self verdwyn. Mense het daarna gesoek, maar," sy beroep haar op haar mede-Rawekllouers, "niemand het ooit 'n spoor daarvan gekry nie, of hoe?"

Hulle skud almal kop.

"Ekskuus, maar wat *is* 'n diadeem?" vra Ron.

"Dis 'n soort kroon," sê Terry Boot. "Raweklou s'n was veronderstel om towereienskappe te hê wat die een wat dit dra wyser maak."

"Ja, Pappa se Jigjors-opsuigers –"

Maar Harry onderbreek Luna.

"En nie een van julle het nog ooit iets gesien wat daarna lyk nie?"

Almal skud weer kop. Harry kyk na Ron en Hermione, en sy eie teleurstelling word na hom teruggekaats. 'n Voorwerp wat so lank gelede verdwyn het, en skynbaar spoorloos, klink nie na 'n goeie kandidaat vir die Horcrux wat in die kasteel weggesteek is nie . . . maar voor hy 'n nuwe vraag kan formuleer, praat Cho weer.

"As jy graag wil sien hoe die diadeem veronderstel is om te lyk, kan ek jou na ons geselskamer toe vat en gaan wys, Harry. Raweklou se standbeeld het dit op."

Harry se litteken skroei weer: die Vertrek van Vereistes swem vir 'n oomblik voor hom en hy sien in plaas daarvan die donker aarde wat onder hom opstyg en voel die groot slang wat gekrul om sy skouers lê. Voldemort vlieg weer, hy weet nie of dit na die ondergrondse meer of hier na die kasteel toe is nie: hoe dit ook al sy, daar is beswaarlik enige tyd oor.

"Hy's aan die beweeg," sê hy sag vir Ron en Hermione. Hy loer na Cho en kyk dan weer na hulle. "Luister, ek weet dis nie veel van 'n leidraad nie, maar ek gaan na daardie standbeeld kyk en ten minste uitvind hoe die diadeem lyk. Wag hier vir my en hou, weet julle – die ander een – veilig."

Cho het intussen opgestaan, maar Ginny sê taamlik driftig: "Nee, Luna sal Harry soontoe vat, of hoe, Luna?"

"Ooooo, ja, ek sal graag wil," sê Luna gelukkig. Cho sit weer en lyk teleurgesteld.

"Hoe kom ons uit?" vra Harry vir Neville.

"Hier."

Hy lei Harry en Luna na 'n hoek waar 'n klein muurkas na 'n steil trap oopmaak.

"Dit kom elke dag iewers anders uit, so hulle kon dit nog nooit

kry nie," sê hy. "Al probleem is, ons weet nooit presies waar ons gaan beland as ons uitgaan nie. Wees versigtig, Harry, hulle patrolleer snags die gange."

"G'n probleem nie," sê Harry. "Sien julle netnou weer."

Hy en Luna gaan haastig met die trap op; dit is lank en met fakkels verlig en gaan op onverwagte plekke om hoeke. Uiteindelik kom hulle uit by wat soos 'n soliede muur lyk.

"Klim onderin," sê Harry vir Luna terwyl hy die Onsigbaarheidsmantel uithaal en dit oor hulle gooi. Hy druk effens teen die muur.

Dit smelt weg by sy aanraking en hulle glip buitentoe. Harry loer terug en sien dit het dadelik weer vanself verseël. Hulle staan in 'n donker gang: Harry trek Luna in die skaduwees terug, vroetel rond in die sakkie om sy nek en haal die Plunderaar se Kaart uit. Hy hou dit naby sy neus, soek en kry hulle kolletjies uiteindelik.

"Ons is op die vyfde verdieping," fluister hy en kyk hoe Filch van hulle af wegbeweeg, een gang verder. "Komaan, hierlangs."

Hulle sluip vorentoe.

Harry het al dikwels tevore snags in die kasteel se gange rondgesluip, maar sy hart het nog nooit so vinnig gehamer nie, want daar het nog nooit soveel afgehang dat hy veilig moet bly nie. Harry en Luna loop deur maanverligte vierkante op die vloer, verby wapenrustings met helms wat kraak by die klank van hulle sagte voetstappe, om hoeke waaragter wie weet wat hulle inwag. Hulle kyk elke keer dat daar lig is op die Plunderaar se Kaart en wag twee keer dat 'n spook kan verbygaan sonder om die aandag op hulle te vestig. Harry verwag om enige oomblik 'n struikelblok teë te kom; Peeves is sy ergste vrees, en hy spits sy ore met elke tree vir die eerste onmiskenbare tekens dat die poltergees aankom.

"Hierlangs, Harry," prewel Luna en trek hom aan sy mou na 'n wenteltrap toe.

Hulle klim in klein, duiselingwekkende sirkels boontoe; Harry was nog nooit hier nie. Einde ten laaste kom hulle by 'n deur uit. Daar is nie 'n handvatsel of 'n sleutelgat nie: niks nie, behalwe 'n eenvoudige ou houtoppervlak met 'n bronsklopper in die vorm van 'n arend.

Luna steek 'n bleek hand uit wat spokerig in die lug sweef, asof dit nie aan 'n arm of liggaam vas is nie. Sy klop een keer, en in die stilte klink dit vir Harry soos 'n kanonskoot. Die arend se snawel gaan dadelik oop, maar in plaas van 'n voëlroep, sê 'n voëltjie in 'n sagte, musikale stem: "Wat was eerste, die feniks of die vlam?"

"Hmm . . . wat dink jy, Harry?" vra Luna en lyk peinsend.

"Wat? Is daar nie net 'n wagwoord nie?"

"O nee, jy moet 'n vraag beantwoord," sê Luna.

"Wat as jy verkeerd is?"

"Wel, dan moet jy wag vir iemand wat reg antwoord," sê Luna. "So leer jy."

"Ja . . . Die probleem is, ons kan nie eintlik bekostig om vir iemand anders te wag nie, Luna."

"Nee, ek sien wat jy bedoel," sê Luna ernstig. "Wel, dan dink ek die antwoord is dat 'n sirkel nie 'n begin het nie."

"Goed geredeneer," sê die stem en die deur swaai oop.

Raweklou se verlate geselskamer is 'n wye, ronde vertrek, lugtiger as enige ander vertrek wat Harry al ooit in Hogwarts gesien het. Grasieuse boogvensters onderbreek die mure wat behang is met blou en brons sy: bedags het die Rawekllouers 'n skouspelagtige uitsig oor die omringende berge. Die koepeldak se plafon is vol sterre geverf wat in die middernagblou tapyt herhaal word. Daar is tafels, stoele en boekrakke, en in 'n nis oorkant die deur staan 'n lang standbeeld van wit marmer.

Harry herken Rowena Raweklou aan die borsbeeld wat hy in Luna se huis gesien het. Die standbeeld staan langs 'n deur wat hy raai na die slaapsale bokant toe lei. Hy loop tot reg voor die marmervrou en dit is asof sy na hom terugkyk met 'n vraende halfglimlag op haar gesig, pragtig, maar nogtans effens intimiderend. Op haar kop is daar 'n marmerreproduksie van 'n delikate ring. Dit lyk effens na die tiara wat Fleur op haar troue gedra het. Daar is klein woorde op geëts. Harry glip onder die Mantel uit en klim op Raweklou se voetstuk om dit te lees.

"*'Onuitputlike wysheid is 'n onuitputlike skat.'* "

"Wat beteken jy is taamlik platsak, onnosel," sê 'n snaterende stem.

Harry swaai om, gly van die voetstuk af en beland op die vloer. Alecto Carrow staan voor hom met haar hangskouers, en terwyl Harry sy towerstaf lig, druk sy 'n stomp voorvinger op die skedel en slang wat op haar voorarm ingebrand is.

CHAPTER THIRTY



THE SACKING OF SEVERUS SNAPE

The moment her finger touched the Mark, Harry's scar burned savagely, the starry room vanished from sight, and he was standing upon an outcrop of rock beneath a cliff, and the sea was washing around him and there was triumph in his heart — *They have the boy.*

A loud *bang* brought Harry back to where he stood: Disoriented, he raised his wand, but the witch before him was already falling forward; she hit the ground so hard that the glass in the bookcases tinkled.

"I've never Stunned anyone except in our D.A. lessons," said Luna, sounding mildly interested. "That was noisier than I thought it would be."

And sure enough, the ceiling had begun to tremble. Scurrying, echoing footsteps were growing louder from behind the door leading to the dormitories: Luna's spell had woken Ravenclaws sleeping above.

"Luna, where are you? I need to get under the Cloak!"

Luna's feet appeared out of nowhere; he hurried to her side and she let the Cloak fall back over them as the door opened and a stream of Ravenclaws, all in their nightclothes, flooded into the common room. There were gasps and cries of surprise as they saw Alecto lying there unconscious. Slowly they shuffled in around her, a savage beast that might wake at any moment and attack them. Then one brave little first-year darted up to her and prodded her backside with his big toe.

"I think she might be dead!" he shouted with delight.

"Oh, look," whispered Luna happily, as the Ravenclaws crowded in around Alecto. "They're pleased!"

"Yeah . . . great . . ."

Harry closed his eyes, and as his scar throbbed he chose to sink again into Voldemort's mind . . . He was moving along the tunnel into the first cave . . . He had chosen to make sure of the locket before coming . . . but that would not take him long. . . .

There was a rap on the common room door and every Ravenclaw froze. From the other side, Harry heard the soft, musical voice that issued from the eagle door knocker: "Where do Vanished objects go?"

"I dunno, do I? Shut it!" snarled an uncouth voice that Harry knew was that of the Carrow brother, Amycus. "Alecto? *Alecto?* Are you

there? Have you got him? Open the door!"

The Ravenclaws were whispering amongst themselves, terrified. Then, without warning, there came a series of loud bangs, as though somebody was firing a gun into the door.

"*ALECTO!* If he comes, and we haven't got Potter — d'you want to go the same way as the Malfoys? ANSWER ME!" Amycus bellowed, shaking the door for all he was worth, but still it did not open. The Ravenclaws were all backing away, and some of the most frightened began scampering back up the staircase to their beds. Then, just as Harry was wondering whether he ought not to blast open the door and Stun Amycus before the Death Eater could do anything else, a second, most familiar voice rang out beyond the door.

"May I ask what you are doing, Professor Carrow?"

"Trying — to get — through this damned — door!" shouted Amycus. "Go and get Flitwick! Get him to open it, now!"

"But isn't your sister in there?" asked Professor McGonagall. "Didn't Professor Flitwick let her in earlier this evening, at your urgent request? Perhaps she could open the door for you? Then you needn't wake up half the castle."

"She ain't answering, you old besom! *You* open it! Garn! Do it, now!"

"Certainly, if you wish it," said Professor McGonagall, with awful coldness. There was a genteel tap of the knocker and the musical voice asked again,

"Where do Vanished objects go?"

"Into nonbeing, which is to say, everything," replied Professor

McGonagall.

"Nicely phrased," replied the eagle door knocker, and the door swung open.

The few Ravenclaws who had remained behind sprinted for the stairs as Amycus burst over the threshold, brandishing his wand. Hunched like his sister, he had a pallid, doughy face and tiny eyes, which fell at once on Alecto, sprawled motionless on the floor. He let out a yell of fury and fear.

"What've they done, the little whelps?" he screamed. "I'll Cruciate the lot of 'em till they tell me who did it — and what's the Dark Lord going to say?" he shrieked, standing over his sister and smacking himself on the forehead with his fist. "We haven't got him, and they've gorn and killed her!"

"She's only Stunned," said Professor McGonagall impatiently, who had stooped down to examine Alecto. "She'll be perfectly all right."

"No she bludgering well won't!" bellowed Amycus. "Not after the Dark Lord gets hold of her! She's gorn and sent for him, I felt me Mark burn, and he thinks we've got Potter!"

"'Got Potter'?" said Professor McGonagall sharply. "What do you mean, 'got Potter'?"

"He told us Potter might try and get inside Ravenclaw Tower, and to send for him if we caught him!"

"Why would Harry Potter try to get inside Ravenclaw Tower? Potter belongs in my House!"

Beneath the disbelief and anger, Harry heard a little strain of pride in her voice, and affection for Minerva McGonagall gushed up inside

him.

"We was told he might come in here!" said Carrow. "I dunno why, do I?"

Professor McGonagall stood up and her beady eyes swept the room. Twice they passed right over the place where Harry and Luna stood.

"We can push it off on the kids," said Amycus, his piglike face suddenly crafty. "Yeah, that's what we'll do. We'll say Alecto was ambushed by the kids, them kids up there" — he looked up at the starry ceiling toward the dormitories — "and we'll say they forced her to press her Mark, and that's why he got a false alarm. . . . He can punish them. Couple of kids more or less, what's the difference?"

"Only the difference between truth and lies, courage and cowardice," said Professor McGonagall, who had turned pale, "a difference, in short, which you and your sister seem unable to appreciate. But let me make one thing very clear. You are not going to pass off your many ineptitudes on the students of Hogwarts. I shall not permit it."

"Excuse me?"

Amycus moved forward until he was offensively close to Professor McGonagall, his face within inches of hers. She refused to back away, but looked down at him as if he were something disgusting she had found stuck to a lavatory seat.

"It's not a case of what *you'll* permit, Minerva McGonagall. Your time's over. It's us what's in charge here now, and you'll back me up or you'll pay the price."

And he spat in her face.

Harry pulled the Cloak off himself, raised his wand, and said, "You shouldn't have done that."

As Amycus spun around, Harry shouted, *"Crucio!"*

The Death Eater was lifted off his feet. He writhed through the air like a drowning man, thrashing and howling in pain, and then, with a crunch and a shattering of glass, he smashed into the front of a bookcase and crumpled, insensible, to the floor.

"I see what Bellatrix meant," said Harry, the blood thundering through his brain, "you need to really mean it."

"Potter!" whispered Professor McGonagall, clutching her heart. "Potter — you're here! What — ? How — ?" She struggled to pull herself together. "Potter, that was foolish!"

"He spat at you," said Harry.

"Potter, I — that was very — very *gallant* of you — but don't you realize — ?"

"Yeah, I do," Harry assured her. Somehow her panic steadied him. "Professor McGonagall, Voldemort's on the way."

"Oh, are we allowed to say the name now?" asked Luna with an air of interest, pulling off the Invisibility Cloak. This appearance of a second outlaw seemed to overwhelm Professor McGonagall, who staggered backward and fell into a nearby chair, clutching at the neck of her old tartan dressing gown.

"I don't think it makes any difference what we call him," Harry told Luna. "He already knows where I am."

In a distant part of Harry's brain, that part connected to the angry, burning scar, he could see Voldemort sailing fast over the dark lake in the ghostly green boat. . . . He had nearly reached the island where

the stone basin stood. . . .

"You must flee," whispered Professor McGonagall. "Now, Potter, as quickly as you can!"

"I can't," said Harry. "There's something I need to do. Professor, do you know where the diadem of Ravenclaw is?"

"The d-diadem of Ravenclaw? Of course not — hasn't it been lost for centuries?" She sat up a little straighter. "Potter, it was madness, utter madness, for you to enter this castle —"

"I had to," said Harry. "Professor, there's something hidden here that I'm supposed to find, and it *could* be the diadem — if I could just speak to Professor Flitwick —"

There was a sound of movement, of clinking glass: Amycus was coming round. Before Harry or Luna could act, Professor McGonagall rose to her feet, pointed her wand at the groggy Death Eater, and said, *"Imperio."*

Amycus got up, walked over to his sister, picked up her wand, then shuffled obediently to Professor McGonagall and handed it over along with his own. Then he lay down on the floor beside Alecto. Professor McGonagall waved her wand again, and a length of shimmering silver rope appeared out of thin air and snaked around the Carrows, binding them tightly together.

"Potter," said Professor McGonagall, turning to face him again with superb indifference to the Carrows' predicament, "if He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named does indeed know that you are here —"

As she said it, a wrath that was like physical pain blazed through Harry, setting his scar on fire, and for a second he looked down upon a basin whose potion had turned clear, and saw that no golden locket

lay safe beneath the surface —

"Potter, are you all right?" said a voice, and Harry came back: He was clutching Luna's shoulder to steady himself.

"Time's running out, Voldemort's getting nearer. Professor, I'm acting on Dumbledore's orders, I must find what he wanted me to find! But we've got to get the students out while I'm searching the castle — it's me Voldemort wants, but he won't care about killing a few more or less, not now —" *not now he knows I'm attacking Horcruxes,* Harry finished the sentence in his head.

"You're acting on *Dumbledore's* orders?" she repeated with a look of dawning wonder. Then she drew herself up to her fullest height.

"We shall secure the school against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named while you search for this — this object."

"Is that possible?"

"I think so," said Professor McGonagall dryly, "we teachers are rather good at magic, you know. I am sure we will be able to hold him off for a while if we all put our best efforts into it. Of course, something will have to be done about Professor Snape —"

"Let me —"

"— and if Hogwarts is about to enter a state of siege, with the Dark Lord at the gates, it would indeed be advisable to take as many innocent people out of the way as possible. With the Floo Network under observation, and Apparition impossible within the grounds —"

"There's a way," said Harry quickly, and he explained about the passageway leading into the Hog's Head.

"Potter, we're talking about hundreds of students —"

"I know, Professor, but if Voldemort and the Death Eaters are

concentrating on the school boundaries they won't be interested in anyone who's Disapparating out of the Hog's Head."

"There's something in that," she agreed. She pointed her wand at the Carrows, and a silver net fell upon their bound bodies, tied itself around them, and hoisted them into the air, where they dangled beneath the blue-and-gold ceiling like two large, ugly sea creatures. "Come. We must alert the other Heads of House. You'd better put that Cloak back on."

She marched toward the door, and as she did so she raised her wand. From the tip burst three silver cats with spectacle markings around their eyes. The Patronuses ran sleekly ahead, filling the spiral staircase with silvery light, as Professor McGonagall, Harry, and Luna hurried back down.

Along the corridors they raced, and one by one the Patronuses left them; Professor McGonagall's tartan dressing gown rustled over the floor, and Harry and Luna jogged behind her under the Cloak.

They had descended two more floors when another set of quiet footsteps joined theirs. Harry, whose scar was still prickling, heard them first: He felt in the pouch around his neck for the Marauder's Map, but before he could take it out, McGonagall too seemed to become aware of their company. She halted, raised her wand ready to duel, and said, "Who's there?"

"It is I," said a low voice.

From behind a suit of armor stepped Severus Snape.

Hatred boiled up in Harry at the sight of him: He had forgotten the details of Snape's appearance in the magnitude of his crimes, forgotten how his greasy black hair hung in curtains around his thin

face, how his black eyes had a dead, cold look. He was not wearing nightclothes, but was dressed in his usual black cloak, and he too was holding his wand ready for a fight.

"Where are the Carrows?" he asked quietly.

"Wherever you told them to be, I expect, Severus," said Professor McGonagall.

Snape stepped nearer, and his eyes flitted over Professor McGonagall into the air around her, as if he knew that Harry was there. Harry held his wand up too, ready to attack.

"I was under the impression," said Snape, "that Alecto had apprehended an intruder."

"Really?" said Professor McGonagall. "And what gave you that impression?"

Snape made a slight flexing movement of his left arm, where the Dark Mark was branded into his skin.

"Oh, but naturally," said Professor McGonagall. "You Death Eaters have your own private means of communication, I forgot."

Snape pretended not to have heard her. His eyes were still probing the air all about her, and he was moving gradually closer, with an air of hardly noticing what he was doing.

"I did not know that it was your night to patrol the corridors, Minerva."

"You have some objection?"

"I wonder what could have brought you out of your bed at this late hour?"

"I thought I heard a disturbance," said Professor McGonagall.

"Really? But all seems calm."

Snape looked into her eyes.

"Have you seen Harry Potter, Minerva? Because if you have, I must insist —"

Professor McGonagall moved faster than Harry could have believed: Her wand slashed through the air and for a split second Harry thought that Snape must crumple, unconscious, but the swiftness of his Shield Charm was such that McGonagall was thrown off balance. She brandished her wand at a torch on the wall and it flew out of its bracket: Harry, about to curse Snape, was forced to pull Luna out of the way of the descending flames, which became a ring of fire that filled the corridor and flew like a lasso at Snape —

Then it was no longer fire, but a great black serpent that McGonagall blasted to smoke, which re-formed and solidified in seconds to become a swarm of pursuing daggers: Snape avoided them only by forcing the suit of armor in front of him, and with echoing clangs the daggers sank, one after another, into its breast —

"Minerva!" said a squeaky voice, and looking behind him, still shielding Luna from flying spells, Harry saw Professors Flitwick and Sprout sprinting up the corridor toward them in their nightclothes, with the enormous Professor Slughorn panting along at the rear.

"No!" squealed Flitwick, raising his wand. "You'll do no more murder at Hogwarts!"

Flitwick's spell hit the suit of armor behind which Snape had taken shelter: With a clatter it came to life. Snape struggled free of the crushing arms and sent it flying back toward his attackers: Harry and Luna had to dive sideways to avoid it as it smashed into the wall and shattered. When Harry looked up again, Snape was in full flight,

McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout all thundering after him: He hurtled through a classroom door and, moments later, he heard McGonagall cry, "Coward! *COWARD!*"

"What's happened, what's happened?" asked Luna.

Harry dragged her to her feet and they raced along the corridor, trailing the Invisibility Cloak behind them, into the deserted classroom where Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout were standing at a smashed window.

"He jumped," said Professor McGonagall as Harry and Luna ran into the room.

"You mean he's *dead*?" Harry sprinted to the window, ignoring Flitwick's and Sprout's yells of shock at his sudden appearance.

"No, he's not dead," said McGonagall bitterly. "Unlike Dumbledore, he was still carrying a wand . . . and he seems to have learned a few tricks from his master."

With a tingle of horror, Harry saw in the distance a huge, batlike shape flying through the darkness toward the perimeter wall.

There were heavy footfalls behind them, and a great deal of puffing: Slughorn had just caught up.

"Harry!" he panted, massaging his immense chest beneath his emerald-green silk pajamas. "My dear boy . . . what a surprise . . . Minerva, do please explain. . . . Severus . . . what . . . ?"

"Our headmaster is taking a short break," said Professor McGonagall, pointing at the Snape-shaped hole in the window.

"Professor!" Harry shouted, his hands at his forehead. He could see the Inferi-filled lake sliding beneath him, and he felt the ghostly green boat bump into the underground shore, and Voldemort leapt

from it with murder in his heart —

"Professor, we've got to barricade the school, he's coming now!"

"Very well. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is coming," she told the other teachers. Sprout and Flitwick gasped; Slughorn let out a low groan. "Potter has work to do in the castle on Dumbledore's orders. We need to put in place every protection of which we are capable while Potter does what he needs to do."

"You realize, of course, that nothing we do will be able to keep out You-Know-Who indefinitely?" squeaked Flitwick.

"But we can hold him up," said Professor Sprout.

"Thank you, Pomona," said Professor McGonagall, and between the two witches there passed a look of grim understanding. "I suggest we establish basic protection around the place, then gather our students and meet in the Great Hall. Most must be evacuated, though if any of those who are over age wish to stay and fight, I think they ought to be given the chance."

"Agreed," said Professor Sprout, already hurrying toward the door. "I shall meet you in the Great Hall in twenty minutes with my House."

And as she jogged out of sight, they could hear her muttering, "Tentacula. Devil's Snare. And Snargaluff pods . . . yes, I'd like to see the Death Eaters fighting those."

"I can act from here," said Flitwick, and although he could barely see out of it, he pointed his wand through the smashed window and started muttering incantations of great complexity. Harry heard a weird rushing noise, as though Flitwick had unleashed the power of the wind into the grounds.

"Professor," Harry said, approaching the little Charms master, "Professor, I'm sorry to interrupt, but this is important. Have you got any idea where the diadem of Ravenclaw is?"

"— *Protego Horribilis* — the diadem of Ravenclaw?" squeaked Flitwick. "A little extra wisdom never goes amiss, Potter, but I hardly think it would be much use in *this* situation!"

"I only meant — do you know where it is? Have you ever seen it?"

"Seen it? Nobody has seen it in living memory! Long since lost, boy!"

Harry felt a mixture of desperate disappointment and panic. What, then, was the Horcrux?

"We shall meet you and your Ravenclaws in the Great Hall, Filius!" said Professor McGonagall, beckoning to Harry and Luna to follow her.

They had just reached the door when Slughorn rumbled into speech.

"My word," he puffed, pale and sweaty, his walrus mustache aquiver. "What a to-do! I'm not at all sure whether this is wise, Minerva. He is bound to find a way in, you know, and anyone who has tried to delay him will be in most grievous peril —"

"I shall expect you and the Slytherins in the Great Hall in twenty minutes, also," said Professor McGonagall. "If you wish to leave with your students, we shall not stop you. But if any of you attempt to sabotage our resistance or take up arms against us within this castle, then, Horace, we duel to kill."

"Minerva!" he said, aghast.

"The time has come for Slytherin House to decide upon its

loyalties," interrupted Professor McGonagall. "Go and wake your students, Horace."

Harry did not stay to watch Slughorn splutter: He and Luna ran after Professor McGonagall, who had taken up a position in the middle of the corridor and raised her wand.

"*Piertotum* — oh, for heaven's sake, Filch, not *now* —"

The aged caretaker had just come hobbling into view, shouting, "Students out of bed! Students in the corridors!"

"They're supposed to be, you blithering idiot!" shouted McGonagall. "Now go and do something constructive! Find Peeves!"

"P-Peeves?" stammered Filch as though he had never heard the name before.

"Yes, *Peeves,* you fool, *Peeves*! Haven't you been complaining about him for a quarter of a century? Go and fetch him, at once!"

Filch evidently thought Professor McGonagall had taken leave of her senses, but hobbled away, hunch-shouldered, muttering under his breath.

"And now — *Piertotum Locomotor!*" cried Professor McGonagall.

And all along the corridor the statues and suits of armor jumped down from their plinths, and from the echoing crashes from the floors above and below, Harry knew that their fellows throughout the castle had done the same.

"Hogwarts is threatened!" shouted Professor McGonagall. "Man the boundaries, protect us, do your duty to our school!"

Clattering and yelling, the horde of moving statues stampeded past Harry: some of them smaller, others larger, than life. There were

animals too, and the clanking suits of armor brandished swords and spiked balls on chains.

"Now, Potter," said McGonagall, "you and Miss Lovegood had better return to your friends and bring them to the Great Hall — I shall rouse the other Gryffindors."

They parted at the top of the next staircase, Harry and Luna running back toward the concealed entrance to the Room of Requirement. As they ran, they met crowds of students, most wearing traveling cloaks over their pajamas, being shepherded down to the Great Hall by teachers and prefects.

"That was Potter!"

"Harry Potter!"

"It was him, I swear, I just saw him!"

But Harry did not look back, and at last they reached the entrance to the Room of Requirement. Harry leaned against the enchanted wall, which opened to admit them, and he and Luna sped back down the steep staircase.

"Wh — ?"

As the room came into view, Harry slipped down a few stairs in shock. It was packed, far more crowded than when he had last been in there. Kingsley and Lupin were looking up at him, as were Oliver Wood, Katie Bell, Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet, Bill and Fleur, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"Harry, what's happening?" said Lupin, meeting him at the foot of the stairs.

"Voldemort's on his way, they're barricading the school — Snape's run for it — What are you doing here? How did you know?"

"We sent messages to the rest of Dumbledore's Army," Fred explained. "You couldn't expect everyone to miss the fun, Harry, and the D.A. let the Order of the Phoenix know, and it all kind of snowballed."

"What first, Harry?" called George. "What's going on?"

"They're evacuating the younger kids and everyone's meeting in the Great Hall to get organized," Harry said. "We're fighting."

There was a great roar and a surge toward the foot of the stairs; he was pressed back against the wall as they ran past him, the mingled members of the Order of the Phoenix, Dumbledore's Army, and Harry's old Quidditch team, all with their wands drawn, heading up into the main castle.

"Come on, Luna," Dean called as he passed, holding out his free hand; she took it and followed him back up the stairs.

The crowd was thinning: Only a little knot of people remained below in the Room of Requirement, and Harry joined them. Mrs. Weasley was struggling with Ginny. Around them stood Lupin, Fred, George, Bill, and Fleur.

"You're underage!" Mrs. Weasley shouted at her daughter as Harry approached. "I won't permit it! The boys, yes, but you, you've got to go home!"

"I won't!"

Ginny's hair flew as she pulled her arm out of her mother's grip.

"I'm in Dumbledore's Army —"

"A teenagers' gang!"

"A teenagers' gang that's about to take him on, which no one else has dared to do!" said Fred.

"She's sixteen!" shouted Mrs. Weasley. "She's not old enough! What you two were thinking, bringing her with you —"

Fred and George looked slightly ashamed of themselves.

"Mum's right, Ginny," said Bill gently. "You can't do this. Everyone underage will have to leave, it's only right."

"I can't go home!" Ginny shouted, angry tears sparkling in her eyes. "My whole family's here, I can't stand waiting there alone and not knowing and —"

Her eyes met Harry's for the first time. She looked at him beseechingly, but he shook his head and she turned away bitterly.

"Fine," she said, staring at the entrance to the tunnel back to the Hog's Head. "I'll say good-bye now, then, and —"

There was a scuffling and a great thump: Someone else had clambered out of the tunnel, overbalanced slightly, and fallen. He pulled himself up on the nearest chair, looked around through lopsided horn-rimmed glasses, and said, "Am I too late? Has it started? I only just found out, so I — I —"

Percy spluttered into silence. Evidently he had not expected to run into most of his family. There was a long moment of astonishment, broken by Fleur turning to Lupin and saying, in a wildly transparent attempt to break the tension, "So — 'ow eez leetle Teddy?"

Lupin blinked at her, startled. The silence between the Weasleys seemed to be solidifying, like ice.

"I — oh yes — he's fine!" Lupin said loudly. "Yes, Tonks is with him — at her mother's —"

Percy and the other Weasleys were still staring at one another, frozen.

“Here, I’ve got a picture!” Lupin shouted, pulling a photograph from inside his jacket and showing it to Fleur and Harry, who saw a tiny baby with a tuft of bright turquoise hair, waving fat fists at the camera.

“I was a fool!” Percy roared, so loudly that Lupin nearly dropped his photograph. “I was an idiot, I was a pompous prat, I was a — a —”

“Ministry-loving, family-disowning, power-hungry moron,” said Fred.

Percy swallowed.

“Yes, I was!”

“Well, you can’t say fairer than that,” said Fred, holding out his hand to Percy.

Mrs. Weasley burst into tears. She ran forward, pushed Fred aside, and pulled Percy into a strangling hug, while he patted her on the back, his eyes on his father.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” Percy said.

Mr. Weasley blinked rather rapidly, then he too hurried to hug his son.

“What made you see sense, Perce?” inquired George.

“It’s been coming on for a while,” said Percy, mopping his eyes under his glasses with a corner of his traveling cloak. “But I had to find a way out and it’s not so easy at the Ministry, they’re imprisoning traitors all the time. I managed to make contact with Aberforth and he tipped me off ten minutes ago that Hogwarts was going to make a fight of it, so here I am.”

“Well, we do look to our prefects to take a lead at times such as

these," said George in a good imitation of Percy's most pompous manner. "Now let's get upstairs and fight, or all the good Death Eaters'll be taken."

"So, you're my sister-in-law now?" said Percy, shaking hands with Fleur as they hurried off toward the staircase with Bill, Fred, and George.

"Ginny!" barked Mrs. Weasley.

Ginny had been attempting, under cover of the reconciliation, to sneak upstairs too.

"Molly, how about this," said Lupin. "Why doesn't Ginny stay here, then at least she'll be on the scene and know what's going on, but she won't be in the middle of the fighting?"

"I —"

"That's a good idea," said Mr. Weasley firmly. "Ginny, you stay in this room, you hear me?"

Ginny did not seem to like the idea much, but under her father's unusually stern gaze, she nodded. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Lupin headed off for the stairs as well.

"Where's Ron?" asked Harry. "Where's Hermione?"

"They must have gone up to the Great Hall already," Mr. Weasley called over his shoulder.

"I didn't see them pass me," said Harry.

"They said something about a bathroom," said Ginny, "not long after you left."

"A bathroom?"

Harry strode across the room to an open door leading off the Room of Requirement and checked the bathroom beyond. It was empty.

“You’re sure they said bath — ?”

But then his scar seared and the Room of Requirement vanished: He was looking through the high wrought-iron gates with winged boars on pillars at either side, looking through the dark grounds toward the castle, which was ablaze with lights. Nagini lay draped over his shoulders. He was possessed of that cold, cruel sense of purpose that preceded murder.

— HOOFSTUK DERTIG —

Severus Snape se Swanesang

Die oomblik dat haar vinger aan die Merk raak, brand Harry se litteken verwoed, die vertrek vol sterre verdwyn en hy staan op 'n rotslys onder 'n krans en die see maal om hom en daar is triomf in sy hart – *hulle het die seun.*

'n Harde knal bring Harry terug na waar hy staan: hy lig sy towerstaf verward, maar die heks voor hom val reeds vorentoe: sy tref die grond met so 'n harde slag dat die glas in die boekkaste rinkel.

"Ek het nog nooit iemand Bedwelm nie, behalwe in ons DS-lesse," sê Luna en klink effens geïnteresseerd. "Dit maak meer lawaai as wat ek gedink het dit sou."

En inderdaad, die plafon begin tril. Skarrelende, weerklinkende voetstappe word harder van agter die deur wat na die slaapsale toe lei: Luna se towerspreuk het die Raweklouers wat bokant slaap, wakker gemaak.

"Luna, waar is jy? Ek moet onder die Mantel inkom!"

Luna se voete verskyn uit die niet: hy haas hom na haar toe en sy gooi die Mantel weer terug oor hulle terwyl die deur oopgaan en 'n string Raweklouers, almal in hulle nagklere, by die geselskamer instroom. Daar is snakke en verbaasde uitroepe toe hulle Alecto bewusteloos op die vloer sien lê. Hulle skuifel stadig nader, 'n wrede monster wat enige oomblik kan wakker word en hulle kan aanval. Dan trippel 'n dapper eerstejaartjie tot by haar en druk met sy groottoon aan haar agterstewe.

"Ek dink sy's dalk dood!" roep hy verheug uit.

"O, kyk," fluister Luna vrolik terwyl die Raweklouers om Alecto saamdrom. "Hulle's bly!"

"Ja . . . wonderlik . . ."

Harry maak sy oë toe en terwyl sy litteken klop, kies hy om weer in Voldemort se gedagtes weg te sink . . . Hy beweeg met die tonnel langs na die eerste grot toe . . . Hy het besluit om seker te maak van die hangertjie voor hy Hogwarts toe gaan . . . maar dit sal hom nie lank neem nie . . .

Daar is 'n klop aan die geselskamer se deur en die Raweklouers vries almal. Harry hoor hoe vra die arenddeurklopper se sagte, musikale stem aan die ander kant: "Waarheen gaan voorwerpe wat verdwyn het?"

"Ek weet nie, oukei? Sjarrap!" skel 'n onbeskofte stem wat Harry sommer weet aan die Carrow-broer, Amycus, behoort. "Alecto? *Alecto?* Is jy daar? Het jy hom? Maak oop die deur!"

Die Raweklouers fluister angsbevange onder mekaar. Dan, sonder waarskuwing, is daar 'n reeks harde plofgeluide asof iemand met 'n geweer skote in die deur afvuur.

"*ALECTO!* As hy kom en ons het nie vir Potter nie – wil jy dieselfde pad as die Malfoys loop? ANTWOORD MY!" Amycus bulder en skud die deur met al sy mag, maar dit gaan nie oop nie. Die Raweklouers retireer almal en party van die bangstes begin met die trap ophardloop, terug bed toe. Dan, net toe Harry wonder of hy die deur nie met sy towerstaf moet oopblaas en Amycus Bedwelm voor die Doodseter enigiets kan doen nie, weerklink daar 'n tweede, baie bekende stem van agter die deur.

"Mag ek vra wat jy doen, professor Carrow?"

"Ek probeer – inkom – by dié verdomde – deur!" skree Amycus. "Gaan haal vir Flitwick! Laat hy dit kom oopmaak, nou dadelik!"

"Maar is jou suster nie daarbinne nie?" vra professor McGonagall. "Het professor Flitwick haar nie vroeër vanaand op julle dringende versoek daar ingelaat nie? Miskien kan sy die deur vir jou oopmaak? Dan hoef jy nie die helfte van die kasteel wakker te maak nie."

"Sy antwoord nie, jou ou bossiebesem! Maak *jy* dit oop! Toe-toe! Doen dit, nou!"

"Sekerlik, as dit is wat jy wil hê," sê professor McGonagall met 'n ysige kilheid. Daar is 'n beleefde klop en die klopper se musikale stem vra weer: "Waarheen gaan voorwerpe wat verdwyn het?"

"Die niet in, met ander woorde, in alles in," antwoord professor McGonagall.

"Goed gestel," antwoord die arenddeurklopper en die deur swaai oop.

Die paar Raweklouers wat nog oor is, nael na die trap toe Amycus oor die drumpel bars terwyl hy sy towerstaf wild rondswaai. Hy is so krom soos sy suster; hy het 'n bleek, degerige vel en klein ogies wat dadelik vir Alecto raak sien waar sy beweginloos op die vloer uitgestrek lê. Hy gee 'n gil van woede en vrees.

"Wat het die snuiters gedoen?" skree hy. "Ek sal die hele spul van hulle Cruciatus tot hulle vir my sê wie dit gedoen het – en wat gaan

die Donker Heer sê?" skreeu hy terwyl hy by sy suster staan en homself met sy vuis teen die voorkop slaan. "Ons het hom nie, en hulle't haar gaan staan en doodmaak!"

"Sy is net Bedwelm," sê professor McGonagall ongeduldig terwyl sy afbuk om Alecto te bekyk. "Sy sal ten volle herstel."

"Nee, verdomp, sy sal nie!" brul Amycus. "Nie ná die Donker Heer haar beetgehad het nie! Sy't hom gaan staan en ontbied, ek voel my Merk brand, en hy dink ons het vir Potter!"

"'Het vir Potter'?" sê professor McGonagall skerp. "Wat bedoel jy, 'het vir Potter'?"

"Hy't gesê Potter sal dalk by Raweklou se Toring probeer inkom en dan moet ons hom ontbied as ons hom gevang het!"

"Hoekom sal Harry Potter by Raweklou se Toring probeer inkom? Potter behoort aan my huis!"

Onder die ongeloof en woede hoor Harry 'n tikkie trots in haar stem, en 'n warm gevoel vir Minerva McGonagall wel in hom op.

"Ons is gewaarsku dat hy dalk hiernatoe sal kom!" sê Carrow. "Hoe moet ek weet hoekom?"

Professor McGonagall kom orent en haar kraaloë swiep deur die vertrek. Hulle gaan twee keer oor die plek waar Harry en Luna staan.

"Ons kan die kinders die skuld gee," sê Amycus en sy varkagtige gesig lyk skielik slinks. "Ja, dis wat ons gaan doen. Ons gaan sê Alecto is in 'n lokval gelei deur die kinders, die kinders daarbo," hy kyk op na die plafon vol sterre, na die slaapsale, "en ons sal sê hulle het haar gedwing om op haar Merk te druk, en dis hoekom hy 'n vals alarm gekry het . . . Hy kan hulle straf. Watse verskil maak 'n paar kinders meer of minder?"

"Net die verskil tussen waarheid en leuens, moed en lafhartigheid," sê professor McGonagall, wat bleek geword het, "kortom, 'n verskil wat jy en jou suster blykbaar onmoontlik vind om na waarde te skat. Maar laat ek een ding baie duidelik maak. Julle gaan nie die skuld vir julle vele tekortkominge op Hogwarts se studente pak nie. Ek sal dit nie toelaat nie."

"Ekskuus?"

Amycus beweeg vorentoe tot hy aanstootlik naby professor McGonagall is, sy gesig duime van hare af. Sy weier om terug te staan, maar kyk af na hom asof hy iets walgliks is wat op 'n toilet se sitplek vassit.

"Dis nie 'n geval van wat *jy* sal toelaat nie, Minerva McGonagall. Jou tyd is verby. Ons is nou in bevel hier en jy gaan saam met my lieg of jy sal die prys daarvoor betaal."

En hy spoeg in haar gesig.

Harry pluk die Mantel van hom af, lig sy towerstaf en sê: "Jy moes dit nie gedoen het nie."

Terwyl Amycus omswaai, skree Harry "*Crucio!*"

Die Doodseter word van sy voete af opgelig. Hy trek stuiptrekkend deur die lug soos iemand wat verdrink terwyl hy wriemel en skree van pyn, en dan is daar 'n gekraak en gebreek van glas toe hy die voorkant van 'n boekkas tref en bewusteloos op die vloer inmekaarsak.

"Ek sien wat Bellatrix bedoel het," sê Harry terwyl die bloed hard deur sy are suis. "Jy moet dit regtig bedoel."

"Potter!" fluister professor McGonagall en gryp na haar hart. "Potter – jy's hier! Wat –? Hoe –?" Sy sukkel om haar reg te ruk. "Potter, dit was dwaas!"

"Hy't Professor gespoeg," sê Harry.

"Potter, ek – dit was baie – baie *galant* van jou – maar besef jy nie –?"

"Ja, ek besef dit," verseker Harry haar. Dit is asof haar paniek hom laat bedaar. "Professor McGonagall, Voldemort is op pad."

"O, word ons nou toegelaat om die naam te sê?" vra Luna belangstellend terwyl sy die Onsigbaarheidsmantel van haar aftrek. Dit lyk of hierdie verskyning van 'n tweede voortvlugtige professor McGonagall oorweldig, want sy steier agteruit, val op die naaste stoel neer en gryp haar ou Skotsgeruite wolkamerjapon se kraag vas.

"Ek dink nie dit maak enige verskil wat ons hom noem nie," sê Harry vir Luna. "Hy weet klaar waar ek is."

In 'n afgeleë deel van Harry se brein, daardie deel wat met die skroeiende litteken verbind is, sien hy hoe Voldemort vinnig oor die donker meer seil in die spookagtige groen bootjie . . . Hy is reeds by die eiland waar die klipkom staan . . .

"Julle moet vlug," fluister professor McGonagall. "Nou, Potter, so vinnig as wat julle kan!"

"Ek kan nie," sê Harry. "Daar is iets wat ek moet doen. Weet Professor waar is Raweklou se diadeem?"

"Raweklou d – diadeem? Natuurlik nie – het dit nie al eeue gelede verdwyn nie?" Sy sit effens meer regop. "Potter, dit was waansin, louter waansin, van jou om hier by die kasteel in te kom –"

"Ek moes," sê Harry. "Professor, daar's iets hier weggesteek wat ek veronderstel is om te kry, en dit is *dalk* die diadeem – as ek net met professor Flitwick kan praat –"

Daar is 'n geluid van beweging, van rinkelende glas: Amycus is besig om by te kom. Voor Harry of Luna kan reageer, is professor

McGonagall op die been. Sy mik met haar towerstaf na die bedwelmde Doodseter en sê: "*Imperio.*"

Amycus staan op, loop na sy suster, tel haar towerstaf op, strompel dan gehoorsaam na professor McGonagall toe en oorhandig dit saam met syne. Dan gaan lê hy op die vloer langs Alecto. Professor McGonagall swaai haar towerstaf weer en 'n lang, glinsterende stuk silwer tou verskyn uit die niet, seil soos 'n slang om die Carrows en bind hulle styf aan mekaar vas.

"Potter," sê professor McGonagall en draai weer na hom, totaal ongeërg teenoor die Carrows se penarie, "as Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie inderdaad weet jy is hier –"

Terwyl sy dit sê, skiet 'n boosheid wat soos fisieke pyn voel deur Harry; dit laat sy litteken nog erger brand, en hy kyk vir 'n sekonde lank af na 'n kom waarin die towerdrankie helder geword het en sien daar lê nie 'n goue hangertjie veilig onder die oppervlak nie –

"Potter, is alles reg?" vra 'n stem en Harry kom terug: hy hou aan Luna se skouer vas om regop te bly.

"Die tyd word min, Voldemort kom nader. Professor, ek voer Dumbledore se bevele uit, ek moet dit wat hy wou hê ek moet opspoor, nóú kry! Maar ons moet die ander studente uitkry terwyl ek die kasteel deursoek – Voldemort is agter my aan, maar hy sal nie omgee om 'n paar mense meer of minder dood te maak nie, nie noudat –" *Nie noudat hy weet ek val sy Horcruxe aan nie*, maak Harry die sin in sy kop klaar.

"Jy voer *Dumbledore* se bevele uit?" herhaal sy verwonderd, maar asof dit tot haar begin deurdring. Dan rek sy haar tot haar volle lengte uit.

"Ons sal die skool teen Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie beveilig terwyl jy na daardie – daardie voorwerp soek."

"Is dit moontlik?"

"Ek dink so," sê professor McGonagall droogweg. "Ons onderwysers is heel bedrewe in die towerkuns, weet jy. Ek is seker ons sal hom 'n ruk lank kan weghou as ons almal ons uiterste bes doen. Daar sal natuurlik iets omtrent professor Snape gedoen moet word –"

"Laat ek –"

"– en as Hogwarts op die punt is om 'n staat van beleg te betree, met die Donker Heer by die poorte, sal dit beslis raadsaam wees om soveel moontlik onskuldige mense uit die pad te kry. Met die Floonetwerk wat dopgehou word en Apparering wat onmoontlik is binne die terrein –"

"Daar *is* 'n manier," sê Harry vinnig en hy verduidelik van die gang wat na die Swynenes toe lei.

"Potter, ons praat van honderde studente –"

"Ek weet, Professor, maar as Voldemort en die Doodseters op die skool se grense konsentreer, sal hulle nie belangstel in enigiemand wat uit die Swynenes Disappareer nie."

"Daar steek iets daarin," stem sy saam. Sy wys met haar towerstaf na die Carrows en 'n silwer net val oor hulle vasgebinde liggame. Die net trek styf om hulle en hys hulle in die lug op, en hulle swaai rond onder die blou en goue plafon soos twee groot, lelike seediere. "Kom, ons moet die ander Huise se Hoofde gaan waarsku. Julle moet liewer weer daardie Mantel oor julle gooi."

Sy marsjeer na die deur toe en terwyl sy dit doen, lig sy haar towerstaf. Drie silwer katte met brilmerke om hulle oë bars uit die towerstaf se punt. Die Patronusse hardloop glad en glansend vooruit en vul die wenteltrap met silwerige ligte terwyl professor McGonagall, Harry en Luna vinnig terug ondertoe gaan.

Hulle haas hulle met die gange langs en die Patronusse verlaat hulle die een ná die ander; professor McGonagall se geruite woljapon ritsel oor die vloer, en Harry en Luna hardloop onder die Mantel agter haar aan.

Hulle is al twee verdiepings verder ondertoe toe nog sagte voetstappe by hulle aansluit. Harry se litteken prik steeds, maar hy hoor dit eerste: hy voel in die sakkie om sy nek na die Plunderaar se Kaart, maar voor hy dit kan uithaal, het professor McGonagall ook bewus geword van die feit dat hulle geselskap het. Sy gaan staan, lig haar towerstaf, gereed om te veg, en sê: "Wie's daar?"

"Dit is ek," sê 'n lae stem.

Severus Snape kom van agter 'n wapenrusting te voorskyn.

Haat kook in Harry op toe hy hom sien. Die omvang van Snape se misdade het hom laat vergeet hoe hy lyk: die olierige swart hare wat soos 'n gordyn om sy dun gesig hang, die dooie, koue kyk in sy swart oë. Hy dra nie nagklere nie, maar is aangetrek in sy gewone swart mantel en hou sy towerstaf ook gereed om te veg.

"Waar is die Carrows?" vra hy sag.

"Ek veronderstel waar ook al jy vir hulle gesê het om te wees, Severus," sê professor McGonagall.

Snape kom nader en sy oë gly oor professor McGonagall na die lug om haar asof hy weet Harry is daar. Harry se towerstaf is ook gelig, gereed om aan te val.

"Ek was onder die indruk," sê Snape, "dat Alecto 'n indringer gevange geneem het."

"Werklik?" sê professor McGonagall. "En wat het jou daardie indruk gegee?"

Snape se linkerarm waarop die Donker Merk ingebrand is, verstyf onwillekeurig.

"O, maar natuurlik," sê professor McGonagall. "Ek het vergeet julle Doodseters het julle eie, privaat manier om te kommunikeer."

Snape maak of hy haar nie gehoor het nie. Sy oë fynkam steeds die lug oral om haar en hy beweeg ongemerk geleidelik nader, asof hy self skaars agterkom dat hy dit doen.

"Ek het nie geweet dit is jou aandbeurt om die gange te patrolleer nie, Minerva."

"Het jy enige beswaar?"

"Ek wonder wat kon jou so laat uit jou bed laat opstaan het?"

"Ek het gedink ek hoor 'n rusversteuring," sê professor McGonagall.

"Werklik? Maar alles lyk dan so kalm?"

Snape kyk in haar oë.

"Het jy Harry Potter gesien, Minerva? Want as jy het, moet ek daarop aandring –"

Professor McGonagall beweeg vinniger as wat Harry gedink het sy kan: haar towerstaf sny deur die lug en vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde dink Harry Snape gaan bewusteloos op 'n hopie neerval, maar sy Skildtowerspreuk is so blitsig dat McGonagall van balans af gegooi word. Sy swaai haar towerstaf na 'n fakkel teen die muur en dit vlieg uit sy draagarm; Harry, wat op die punt is om Snape te vervloek, word gedwing om Luna uit die vallende vlamme se pad te ruk; dit word 'n ring van vuur wat die gang vul en soos 'n vangriem na Snape toe vlieg –

Dan is dit nie meer vuur nie, maar 'n groot swart slang wat McGonagall laat ontplof in rook wat binne sekondes hervorm en stol tot 'n swerm aanvallende dolke: Snape ontduik hulle ternouernood deur die wapenrusting voor hom in te pluk, en met 'n weergalmende gekletter sink die dolke die een ná die ander in die borsstuk –

"Minerva!" sê 'n piepstemmetjie. Harry is nog besig om Luna teen die vlieënde vloeke te beskerm, maar kyk om en sien professors Flitwick en Sprout in hulle nagklere met die gang af aangehardloop kom, met die enorme professor Slughorn hygend agterna.

"Nee!" gil Flitwick en lig sy towerstaf. "Jy gaan nie nog moorde hier in Hogwarts pleeg nie!"

Flitwick se towerspreuk tref die wapenrusting waaragter Snape skuiling gesoek het: met 'n gekletter beweeg dit. Snape veg om los te kom uit die vergruisende arms en stuur dit vlieënd terug na sy aanvallers toe. Harry en Luna moet wegduik en platval om dit te

ontwyk en dit tref die muur met 'n slag en spat in stukke. Toe Harry weer opkyk, is Snape vinnig aan die vlug met McGonagall, Flitwick en Sprout wat agter hom aanstorm. Snape bars by 'n klaskamer se deur in en oomblikke later hoor Harry McGonagall uitroep: "Lafaard! LAFAARD!"

"Wat het gebeur, wat het gebeur?" vra Luna.

Harry help haar regop kom en hulle nael in die gang af met die Onsigbaarheidsmantel wat agter hulle aansleep en in by die verlate klaskamer waar professors McGonagall, Flitwick en Sprout by 'n gebreekte venster staan.

"Hy't gespring," sê professor McGonagall toe Harry en Luna by die vertrek inhardloop.

"Professor bedoel hy's *dood*?" Harry nael na die venster toe en ignoreer Flitwick en Sprout se uitroepe van skok oor sy skielike verskyning.

"Nee, hy's nie dood nie," sê McGonagall bitter. "Anders as Dumbledore het hy steeds 'n towerstaf in sy hand gehad . . . en dit lyk of hy 'n paar toertjies by sy meester geleer het."

Met 'n sweem van afgryse sien Harry in die verte 'n yslike, vlermuisagtige vorm wat deur die donker na die grensmuur toe vlieg.

Daar is die geluid van swaar voetstappe en 'n hewige gehyg agter hulle; Slughorn het hulle so pas ingehaal.

"Harry!" sê hy uitasem terwyl hy sy kolossale borskas onder sy smaraggroen sypajamas masseer. "My liewe seun . . . wat 'n verrassing . . . Minerva, verduidelik asseblief . . . Severus . . . wat . . .?"

"Ons skoolhoof vat 'n kort blaaskansie," sê professor McGonagall en wys na die Snape-vormige gat in die venster.

"Professor!" roep Harry uit met sy hande op sy voorkop. Hy sien die meer vol Inferi onder hom verbygly en hy voel hoe stamp die spookagtige groen bootjie teen die ondergrondse oewer en Voldemort spring daaruit met moord in sy hart –

"Professor, ons moet die skool afsper, hy kom nou!"

"Goed dan. Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie is op pad," sê sy vir die ander onderwysers. Sprout en Flitwick snak na asem; Slughorn uiter 'n lae kreun. "Potter het werk om in die kasteel te doen, op Dumbledore se bevel. Ons moet elke moontlike beskerming waartoe ons in staat is om die plek oprig terwyl Potter doen wat hy moet doen."

"Jy besef natuurlik dat niks wat ons kan doen Jy-Weet-Wie vir 'n onbepaalde tyd sal uithou nie?" piep Flitwick.

"Maar ons kan hom vertraag," sê professor Sprout.

"Dankie, Pomona," sê professor McGonagall en die twee hekse

kyk met wrang begrip na mekaar. "Ek stel voor ons rig basiese beskerming om die plek op, maak dan ons studente bymekaar en ontmoet in die Groot Saal. Die meeste moet na veiligheid gebring word, maar as enige van diegene wat mondig is, verkies om te bly en te veg, dink ek ons behoort hulle die geleentheid te gun."

"Akkoord," sê professor Sprout wat reeds haastig deur toe mik. "Ek ontmoet julle oor twintig minute in die Groot Saal met my huis."

En terwyl sy wegdraf, hoor hulle haar mompel: "Tentakula. Duiwelstrik. En Snargaloefpeule . . . Ja, ek sal graag wil sien hoe baklei die Doodseters daarteen."

"Ek kan van hier af iets doen," sê Flitwick, en al kan hy beswaarlik daarby uitkyk, rig hy sy towerstaf deur die gebreekte venster en begin geweldig ingewikkelde inkantasies prewel. Harry hoor 'n eienaardige suisgeluid, asof Flitwick die wind se mag oor die terrein losgelaat het.

"Professor," sê Harry en beweeg nader aan die klein Towerspreukmeester, "Professor, ek's jammer om te onderbreek, maar dit is belangrik. Het u enige idee waar Raweklou se diadeem is?"

". . . *Protego horribilis* – Raweklou se diadeem?" piep Flitwick. "'n Bietjie ekstra wysheid is nooit te versmaai nie, Potter, maar ek twyfel of dit in *hierdie* situasie van veel nut sal wees!"

"Ek het net bedoel – weet Professor waar dit is? Het u dit al ooit gesien?"

"Dit gesien? Niemand het dit in menseheugenis gesien nie! Dit het lank gelede verlore geraak, seun!"

Harry voel 'n mengsel van desperate teleurstelling en paniek. Wat is dan die Horcrux?

"Ons ontmoet jou en jou Rawekloueers in die Groot Saal, Filius!" sê professor McGonagall en beduie vir Harry en Luna om haar te volg.

Hulle is net mooi by die deur toe Slughorn dreunend begin praat.

"My wêreld," hyg hy bleek en natgesweet en sy walrussnor bewe. "Wat 'n gedoente! Ek is glad nie seker of dit wys is nie, Minerva. Hy sal stellig 'n pad in kry, weet jy, en enigiemand wat hom probeer vertraag het, sal in die allerverskriklikste lewensgevaar verkeer –"

"Ek verwag jou en die Slytherins ook oor twintig minute in die Groot Saal," sê professor McGonagall. "As jy saam met jou studente wil vertrek, sal ons jou nie keer nie. Maar as enige van julle 'n poging aanwend om ons weerstand te saboteer, of om binne die kasteel die wapen teen ons op te neem, dan, Horace, sal ons tot die dood toe veg."

"Minerva!" roep hy geskok uit.

"Dit het tyd geword dat Huis Slytherin besluit waar sy lojaliteit lê," kondig professor McGonagall aan. "Gaan maak jou studente wakker, Horace."

Harry bly nie om te kyk hoe Slughorn proes nie; hy en Luna hardloop agter professor McGonagall aan wat posisie in die middel van die gang ingeneem het en haar towerstaf lig.

"*Piertotum* – og, om hemelswil, Filch, nie *nou* nie –"

Die bejaarde opsigter, wat so pas hinkepink sy verskyning gemaak het, skree: "Studente uit die bed! Studente in die gange!"

"Dis waar hulle veronderstel is om te wees, jou onnosel swaap!" roep McGonagall. "Gaan doen nou iets konstruktiefs! Kry vir Peeves!"

"P – Peeves?" stamel Filch asof hy die naam nog nooit gehoor het nie.

"Ja, *Peeves*, jou stommerik, *Peeves*! Kla jy nie al 'n kwarteeu lank oor hom nie? Gaan haal hom, op die daad!"

Filch dink duidelik professor McGonagall is van haar sinne beroof, maar hy strompel krom weg terwyl hy binnensmonds mompel.

"En nou – *piertotum locomotor!*" roep professor McGonagall uit.

En al die standbeelde en wapenrustings in die gang spring van hulle voetstukke af, en uit die weerklinkende gegalm van die verdiepings bokant en onder hulle lei Harry af hulle eweknieë dwarsdeur die kasteel het dieselfde gedoen.

"Hogwarts word bedreig!" skree professor McGonagall. "Beman die grense, beskerm ons, kom julle plig teenoor ons skool na!"

Rammelend en gillend sit die horde bewegende standbeelde verby Harry op loop: party van hulle is kleiner, ander groter as lewensgroot. Daar is diere ook, en die kletterende wapenrustings swaai swaarde en spykerballe aan kettings rond.

"Reg, Potter," sê professor McGonagall, "jy en juffrou Lovegood moet liewer terug na julle vriende toe gaan en hulle na die Groot Saal toe bring – ek sal die ander Gryffindors wakker maak."

Hulle weë skei aan die bokant van die volgende trap: Harry en Luna nael terug na die Vertrek van Vereistes se versteekte ingang toe. In die hardloop gaan hulle verby groot groepe studente, die meeste met reismantels oor hulle pajamas, wat deur onderwysers en prefekte na die Groot Saal toe aangekeer word.

"Dit was Potter!"

"Harry Potter!"

"Dit was hy, ek sweer, ek het hom nou net gesien!"

Maar Harry kyk nie om nie, en uiteindelik kom hulle by die Vertrek van Vereistes se ingang. Harry leun teen die betowerde muur, wat oopgaan en hulle inlaat, en hy en Luna haas hulle by die steil trap af.

"Wa–?"

Toe die vertrek in die oog kom, gly Harry van skok by 'n paar trappe af. Dit is stampvol; daar is baie meer mense as toe hy laas hier was. Kingsley en Lupin kyk op na hom, sowel as Oliver Wood, Katie Bell, Angelina Johnson en Alicia Spinnet, Bill en Fleur, en meneer en mevrou Weasley.

"Harry, wat gaan aan?" vra Lupin wat hom aan die voet van die trap ontmoet.

"Voldemort is op pad, hulle versper die skool – Snape het gevlug – wat doen julle hier? Hoe het julle geweet?"

"Ons het vir die res van Dumbledore se Soldate boodskappe gestuur," verduidelik Fred. "Jy kan nie verwag almal moet die sports mis nie, Harry, en die DS het die Orde van die Feniks laat weet en toe het dit alles soort van momentum gekry."

"Wat gebeur eerste, Harry?" roep George uit. "Wat gaan vir wat?"

"Hulle gaan die jonger kinders wegstuur en almal ontmoet in die Groot Saal om reëlings te tref," sê Harry. "Ons gaan baklei."

Daar is 'n groot gedruis en almal storm na die voet van die trap; hy word agter teen die muur vasgedruk soos hulle verby hom hardloop: die deurmekaar mengsel van lede van die Orde van die Feniks, Dumbledore se Soldate en Harry se ou Kwiddiekspan, almal met hulle towerstawwe gereed en op pad boontoe na die hoofgedeelte van die kasteel.

"Komaan, Luna," roep Dean in die verbyhardloop en hou sy los hand uit; sy neem dit en volg hom terug by die trap op.

Die menigte word minder: net 'n klein groepie mense bly onder in die Vertrek van Vereistes agter, en Harry sluit by hulle aan. Mevrou Weasley stry met Ginny. Lupin, Fred, George, Bill en Fleur staan om hulle.

"Jy's minderjarig!" gil mevrou Weasley vir haar dogter terwyl Harry nader kom. "Ek sal dit nie toelaat nie! Die seuns, ja, maar nie jy nie, jy moet huis toe gaan!"

"Ek sal nie!"

Ginny se hare vlieg soos sy haar arms uit haar ma se greep losruk.

"Ek is een van Dumbledore se Soldate –"

"– 'n tienerbende!"

"'n Tienerbende wat op die punt staan om hom aan te vat, wat niemand anders nog ooit durf doen het nie!" sê Fred.

"Sy's sestien!" roep mevrou Weasley uit. "Sy's te jonk! Wat het julle besiel om haar saam te bring –?"

Dit lyk of Fred en George effens skaam kry.

"Ma is reg, Ginny," sê Bill sag. "Jy kan dit nie doen nie. Almal wat minderjarig is, moet hier weg, dis beter so."

"Ek kan nie huis toe gaan nie!" sê Ginny en trane van woede blink in haar oë. "My hele familie is hier, ek sal dit nie kan vat om alleen daar te moet wag en nie te weet of –"

Dit is die eerste keer dat sy Harry in die oë kyk. Sy kyk pleitend na hom, maar hy skud sy kop en sy draai bitter weg.

"Oukei," sê sy en staar na die ingang van die tonnel wat terug na die Swynenes toe lei. "Dan moet ek seker maar tot siens sê en –"

Daar is 'n geskuifel en 'n harde slag: iemand anders het by die tonnel uitgeklim, sy balans verloor en geval. Hy trek homself aan die naaste stoel op, kyk rond deur sy skewe horingraambril en sê: "Is ek te laat? Het dit begin? Ek het so pas eers uitgevind, so ek – ek –"

Percy stotter tot stilte. Hy het duidelik nie verwag hy gaan hom in die meeste van sy familie vasloop nie. Daar is 'n lang oomblik van verstomming, wat verbreek word deur Fleur wat in 'n desperate, deursigtige poging om die spanning te verbreek na Lupin draai en sê: "En 'oe gaan dit met klein Teddy?"

Lupin knip sy oë en kyk haar verras aan. Die stilte tussen die Weasleys stol, soos ys.

"Ek – o ja – hy's piekfyn!" sê Lupin hard. "Ja, Tonks is by hom – by haar ma se huis."

Percy en die ander Weasleys staar steeds na mekaar, vasgevries.

"Hier, ek het 'n kiekie!" roep Lupin uit. Hy pluk 'n foto uit sy baadjie en wys dit vir Fleur en Harry, en hulle kyk na 'n klein babatjie met 'n klossie helder turkoois hare wat met vet vuisies vir die kamera waai.

"Ek was 'n gek!" brul Percy so hard dat Lupin amper sy foto laat val. "Ek was 'n idioot, ek was 'n arrogante aap, ek was 'n – 'n –"

" 'n Ministerie-boetie, 'n familieverraaier, 'n magshonger moroon," sê Fred.

Percy sluk. "Ja, ek was!"

"Wel, jy kan dit nie beter as dit stel nie," sê Fred en hou sy hand na Percy uit.

Mevrou Weasley bars in trane uit. Sy hardloop vorentoe, stoot Fred weg en gryp Percy in 'n wurggreep vas. Hy klop haar op die rug met sy oë op sy pa.

"Ek's jammer, Pa," sê Percy.

Meneer Weasley knipper sy oë 'n paar keer vinnig en kom dan ook haastig nader om sy seun te omhels.

"Wat het jou die lig laat sien, Perce?" vra George.

"Dit is al 'n hele rukkie," sê Percy en vee sy oë onder sy bril met

'n punt van sy reismantel af. "Maar ek moes 'n wegkomkans kry en dis nie so maklik by die Ministerie nie, want hulle arresteer aanhoudend verraaiers. Ek het dit reggekry om met Aberforth kontak te maak en hy't my tien minute gelede laat weet Hogwarts maak gereed om te veg, so hier is ek."

"Wel, in tye soos hierdie vertrou ons op ons prefekte om die leiding te neem," sê George in 'n goeie nabootsing van Percy op sy hoogdrawendste. "Nou kom ons gaan boontoe en gaan baklei voor al die liewe Doodseters die emmer skop."

"So, jy's nou my skoonsuster?" sê Percy en skud Fleur se hand terwyl hulle hulle saam met Bill, Fred en George na die trap toe haas.

"Ginny!" blaf mevrou Weasley.

Ginny het probeer om tussen die versoening deur ook boontoe te sluip.

"Molly, ek sê jou wat," kom Lupin tussenbeide. "Hoekom bly Ginny nie hier nie? Dan is sy ten minste op die toneel en weet wat aangaan, maar sy sal nie in die hitte van die stryd wees nie?"

"Ek –"

"Dis 'n goeie idee," sê meneer Weasley beslis. "Ginny, jy bly in hierdie Vertrek, hoor jy my?"

Dit lyk nie of Ginny juis baie van die idee hou nie, maar haar pa se ongewone streng blik laat haar knik. Meneer en mevrou Weasley en Lupin mik nou ook trap toe.

"Waar's Ron?" vra Harry. "Waar's Hermione?"

"Hulle moet klaar op na die Groot Saal toe gegaan het," roep meneer Weasley oor sy skouer.

"Ek het hulle nie verby my sien kom nie," sê Harry.

"Hulle't iets van 'n badkamer gesê," sê Ginny, "nie lank ná jy weg is nie."

" 'n Badkamer?"

Harry loop deur die vertrek na 'n oop deur wat by die Vertrek van Vereistes uitlei en kyk by die badkamer in. Dit is leeg.

"Is jy seker hulle't gesê bad– ?"

Maar dan skroei sy litteken en die Vertrek van Vereistes verdwyn: hy kyk op deur die hoë smeeysterhekke met die gevleuelde wildevarke op die pilare aan weerskante daarvan, kyk op deur die donker terrein na die kasteel wat nou helder verlig is, met Nagini oor sy skouers gedrapeer. Hy is vervul met daardie koue, wrede doelgerigtheid wat moord voorafgaan.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



THE BATTLE OF HOGWARTS

The enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall was dark and scattered with stars, and below it the four long House tables were lined with disheveled students, some in traveling cloaks, others in dressing gowns. Here and there shone the pearly white figures of the school ghosts. Every eye, living and dead, was fixed upon Professor McGonagall, who was speaking from the raised platform at the top of the Hall. Behind her stood the remaining teachers, including the palomino centaur, Firenze, and the members of the Order of the Phoenix who had arrived to fight.

". . . evacuation will be overseen by Mr. Filch and Madam Pomfrey. Prefects, when I give the word, you will organize your House and take your charges, in an orderly fashion, to the evacuation

point.”

Many of the students looked petrified. However, as Harry skirted the walls, scanning the Gryffindor table for Ron and Hermione, Ernie Macmillan stood up at the Hufflepuff table and shouted, “And what if we want to stay and fight?”

There was a smattering of applause.

“If you are of age, you may stay,” said Professor McGonagall.

“What about our things?” called a girl at the Ravenclaw table. “Our trunks, our owls?”

“We have no time to collect possessions,” said Professor McGonagall. “The important thing is to get you out of here safely.”

“Where’s Professor Snape?” shouted a girl from the Slytherin table.

“He has, to use the common phrase, done a bunk,” replied Professor McGonagall, and a great cheer erupted from the Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, and Ravenclaws.

Harry moved up the Hall alongside the Gryffindor table, still looking for Ron and Hermione. As he passed, faces turned in his direction, and a great deal of whispering broke out in his wake.

“We have already placed protection around the castle,” Professor McGonagall was saying, “but it is unlikely to hold for very long unless we reinforce it. I must ask you, therefore, to move quickly and calmly, and do as your prefects —”

But her final words were drowned as a different voice echoed throughout the Hall. It was high, cold, and clear: There was no telling from where it came; it seemed to issue from the walls themselves. Like the monster it had once commanded, it might have lain dormant

there for centuries.

"I know that you are preparing to fight." There were screams amongst the students, some of whom clutched each other, looking around in terror for the source of the sound. "Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood."

There was silence in the Hall now, the kind of silence that presses against the eardrums, that seems too huge to be contained by walls.

"Give me Harry Potter," said Voldemort's voice, "and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter, and you will be rewarded.

"You have until midnight."

The silence swallowed them all again. Every head turned, every eye in the place seemed to have found Harry, to hold him frozen in the glare of thousands of invisible beams. Then a figure rose from the Slytherin table and he recognized Pansy Parkinson as she raised a shaking arm and screamed, "But he's there! Potter's *there*! Someone grab him!"

Before Harry could speak, there was a massive movement. The Gryffindors in front of him had risen and stood facing, not Harry, but the Slytherins. Then the Hufflepuffs stood, and almost at the same moment, the Ravenclaws, all of them with their backs to Harry, all of them looking toward Pansy instead, and Harry, awestruck and overwhelmed, saw wands emerging everywhere, pulled from beneath cloaks and from under sleeves.

"Thank you, Miss Parkinson," said Professor McGonagall in a clipped voice. "You will leave the Hall first with Mr. Filch. If the

rest of your House could follow."

Harry heard the grinding of benches and then the sound of the Slytherins trooping out on the other side of the Hall.

"Ravenclaws, follow on!" cried Professor McGonagall.

Slowly the four tables emptied. The Slytherin table was completely deserted, but a number of older Ravenclaws remained seated while their fellows filed out; even more Hufflepuffs stayed behind, and half of Gryffindor remained in their seats, necessitating Professor McGonagall's descent from the teachers' platform to chivvy the underage on their way.

"Absolutely not, Creevey, go! *And* you, Peakes!"

Harry hurried over to the Weasleys, all sitting together at the Gryffindor table.

"Where are Ron and Hermione?"

"Haven't you found — ?" began Mr. Weasley, looking worried.

But he broke off as Kingsley had stepped forward on the raised platform to address those who had remained behind.

"We've only got half an hour until midnight, so we need to act fast! A battle plan has been agreed between the teachers of Hogwarts and the Order of the Phoenix. Professors Flitwick, Sprout, and McGonagall are going to take groups of fighters up to the three highest towers — Ravenclaw, Astronomy, and Gryffindor — where they'll have a good overview, excellent positions from which to work spells. Meanwhile Remus" — he indicated Lupin — "Arthur" — he pointed toward Mr. Weasley, sitting at the Gryffindor table — "and I will take groups into the grounds. We'll need somebody to organize defense of the entrances of the passageways into the school

—"

"Sounds like a job for us," called Fred, indicating himself and George, and Kingsley nodded his approval.

"All right, leaders up here and we'll divide up the troops!"

"Potter," said Professor McGonagall, hurrying up to him, as students flooded the platform, jostling for position, receiving instructions, *"Aren't you supposed to be looking for something?"*

"What? Oh," said Harry, "oh yeah!"

He had almost forgotten about the Horcrux, almost forgotten that the battle was being fought so that he could search for it: The inexplicable absence of Ron and Hermione had momentarily driven every other thought from his mind.

"Then go, Potter, go!"

"Right — yeah —"

He sensed eyes following him as he ran out of the Great Hall again, into the entrance hall still crowded with evacuating students. He allowed himself to be swept up the marble staircase with them, but at the top he hurried off along a deserted corridor. Fear and panic were clouding his thought processes. He tried to calm himself, to concentrate on finding the Horcrux, but his thoughts buzzed as frantically and fruitlessly as wasps trapped beneath a glass. Without Ron and Hermione to help him he could not seem to marshal his ideas. He slowed down, coming to a halt halfway along an empty passage, where he sat down upon the plinth of a departed statue and pulled the Marauder's Map out of the pouch around his neck. He could not see Ron's or Hermione's names anywhere on it, though the density of the crowd of dots now making its way to the Room of

Requirement might, he thought, be concealing them. He put the map away, pressed his hands over his face, and closed his eyes, trying to concentrate. . . .

Voldemort thought I'd go to Ravenclaw Tower.

There it was: a solid fact, the place to start. Voldemort had stationed Alecto Carrow in the Ravenclaw common room, and there could only be one explanation: Voldemort feared that Harry already knew his Horcrux was connected to that House.

But the only object anyone seemed to associate with Ravenclaw was the lost diadem . . . and how could the Horcrux be the diadem? How was it possible that Voldemort, the Slytherin, had found the diadem that had eluded generations of Ravenclaws? Who could have told him where to look, when nobody had seen the diadem in living memory?

In living memory . . .

Beneath his fingers, Harry's eyes flew open again. He leapt up from the plinth and tore back the way he had come, now in pursuit of his one last hope. The sound of hundreds of people marching toward the Room of Requirement grew louder and louder as he returned to the marble stairs. Prefects were shouting instructions, trying to keep track of the students in their own Houses; there was much pushing and shoving; Harry saw Zacharias Smith bowling over first-years to get to the front of the queue; here and there younger students were in tears, while older ones called desperately for friends or siblings. . . .

Harry caught sight of a pearly white figure drifting across the entrance hall below and yelled as loudly as he could over the clamor.

"Nick! NICK! I need to talk to you!"

He forced his way back through the tide of students, finally reaching the bottom of the stairs, where Nearly Headless Nick, ghost of Gryffindor Tower, stood waiting for him.

"Harry! My dear boy!"

Nick made to grasp Harry's hands with both of his own: Harry's felt as though they had been thrust into icy water.

"Nick, you've got to help me. Who's the ghost of Ravenclaw Tower?"

Nearly Headless Nick looked surprised and a little offended.

"The Gray Lady, of course; but if it is ghostly services you require — ?"

"It's got to be her — d'you know where she is?"

"Let's see. . . ."

Nick's head wobbled a little on his ruff as he turned hither and thither, peering over the heads of the swarming students.

"That's her over there, Harry, the young woman with the long hair."

Harry looked in the direction of Nick's transparent, pointing finger and saw a tall ghost who caught sight of Harry looking at her, raised her eyebrows, and drifted away through a solid wall.

Harry ran after her. Once through the door of the corridor into which she had disappeared, he saw her at the very end of the passage, still gliding smoothly away from him.

"Hey — wait — come back!"

She consented to pause, floating a few inches from the ground. Harry supposed that she was beautiful, with her waist-length hair and floor-length cloak, but she also looked haughty and proud. Close to,

he recognized her as a ghost he had passed several times in the corridor, but to whom he had never spoken.

"You're the Gray Lady?"

She nodded but did not speak.

"The ghost of Ravenclaw Tower?"

"That is correct."

Her tone was not encouraging.

"Please: I need some help. I need to know anything you can tell me about the lost diadem."

A cold smile curved her lips.

"I am afraid," she said, turning to leave, "that I cannot help you."

"WAIT!"

He had not meant to shout, but anger and panic were threatening to overwhelm him. He glanced at his watch as she hovered in front of him: It was a quarter to midnight.

"This is urgent," he said fiercely. "If that diadem's at Hogwarts, I've got to find it, fast."

"You are hardly the first student to covet the diadem," she said disdainfully. "Generations of students have badgered me —"

"This isn't about trying to get better marks!" Harry shouted at her. "It's about Voldemort — defeating Voldemort — or aren't you interested in that?"

She could not blush, but her transparent cheeks became more opaque, and her voice was heated as she replied, "Of course I — how dare you suggest — ?"

"Well, help me, then!"

Her composure was slipping.

"It — it is not a question of —" she stammered. "My mother's diadem —"

"Your *mother's*?"

She looked angry with herself.

"When I lived," she said stiffly, "I was Helena Ravenclaw."

"You're her *daughter*? But then, you must know what happened to it!"

"While the diadem bestows wisdom," she said with an obvious effort to pull herself together, "I doubt that it would greatly increase your chances of defeating the wizard who calls himself Lord —"

"Haven't I just told you, I'm not interested in wearing it!" Harry said fiercely. "There's no time to explain — but if you care about Hogwarts, if you want to see Voldemort finished, you've got to tell me anything you know about the diadem!"

She remained quite still, floating in midair, staring down at him, and a sense of hopelessness engulfed Harry. Of course, if she had known anything, she would have told Flitwick or Dumbledore, who had surely asked her the same question. He had shaken his head and made to turn away when she spoke in a low voice.

"I stole the diadem from my mother."

"You — you did what?"

"I stole the diadem," repeated Helena Ravenclaw in a whisper. "I sought to make myself cleverer, more important than my mother. I ran away with it."

He did not know how he had managed to gain her confidence, and did not ask; he simply listened, hard, as she went on:

"My mother, they say, never admitted that the diadem was gone, but pretended that she had it still. She concealed her loss, my dreadful betrayal, even from the other founders of Hogwarts.

"Then my mother fell ill — fatally ill. In spite of my perfidy, she was desperate to see me one more time. She sent a man who had long loved me, though I spurned his advances, to find me. She knew that he would not rest until he had done so."

Harry waited. She drew a deep breath and threw back her head.

"He tracked me to the forest where I was hiding. When I refused to return with him, he became violent. The Baron was always a hot-tempered man. Furious at my refusal, jealous of my freedom, he stabbed me."

"The *Baron*? You mean — ?"

"The Bloody Baron, yes," said the Gray Lady, and she lifted aside the cloak she wore to reveal a single dark wound in her white chest. "When he saw what he had done, he was overcome with remorse. He took the weapon that had claimed my life, and used it to kill himself. All these centuries later, he wears his chains as an act of penitence . . . as he should," she added bitterly.

"And . . . and the diadem?"

"It remained where I had hidden it when I heard the Baron blundering through the forest toward me. Concealed inside a hollow tree."

"A hollow tree?" repeated Harry. "What tree? Where was this?"

"A forest in Albania. A lonely place I thought was far beyond my mother's reach."

"Albania," repeated Harry. Sense was emerging miraculously from

confusion, and now he understood why she was telling him what she had denied Dumbledore and Flitwick. "You've already told someone this story, haven't you? Another student?"

She closed her eyes and nodded.

"I had . . . no idea. . . . He was . . . flattering. He seemed to . . . to understand . . . to sympathize. . . ."

Yes, Harry thought, Tom Riddle would certainly have understood Helena Ravenclaw's desire to possess fabulous objects to which she had little right.

"Well, you weren't the first person Riddle wormed things out of," Harry muttered. "He could be charming when he wanted. . . ."

So Voldemort had managed to wheedle the location of the lost diadem out of the Gray Lady. He had traveled to that far-flung forest and retrieved the diadem from its hiding place, perhaps as soon as he left Hogwarts, before he even started work at Borgin and Burkes.

And wouldn't those secluded Albanian woods have seemed an excellent refuge when, so much later, Voldemort had needed a place to lie low, undisturbed, for ten long years?

But the diadem, once it became his precious Horcrux, had not been left in that lowly tree. . . . No, the diadem had been returned secretly to its true home, and Voldemort must have put it there —

"— the night he asked for a job!" said Harry, finishing his thought.

"I beg your pardon?"

"He hid the diadem in the castle, the night he asked Dumbledore to let him teach!" said Harry. Saying it out loud enabled him to make sense of it all. "He must've hidden the diadem on his way up to, or down from, Dumbledore's office! But it was still worth trying to get

the job — then he might've got the chance to nick Gryffindor's sword as well — thank you, thanks!"

Harry left her floating there, looking utterly bewildered. As he rounded the corner back into the entrance hall, he checked his watch. It was five minutes until midnight, and though he now knew *what* the last Horcrux was, he was no closer to discovering *where* it was. . . .

Generations of students had failed to find the diadem; that suggested that it was not in Ravenclaw Tower — but if not there, where? What hiding place had Tom Riddle discovered inside Hogwarts Castle, that he believed would remain secret forever?

Lost in desperate speculation, Harry turned a corner, but he had taken only a few steps down the new corridor when the window to his left broke open with a deafening, shattering crash. As he leapt aside, a gigantic body flew in through the window and hit the opposite wall. Something large and furry detached itself, whimpering, from the new arrival and flung itself at Harry.

"Hagrid!" Harry bellowed, fighting off Fang the boarhound's attentions as the enormous bearded figure clambered to his feet. "What the — ?"

"Harry, yer here! *Yer here!*"

Hagrid stooped down, bestowed upon Harry a cursory and rib-cracking hug, then ran back to the shattered window.

"Good boy, Grawpy!" he bellowed through the hole in the window. "I'll see yer in a moment, there's a good lad!"

Beyond Hagrid, out in the dark night, Harry saw bursts of light in the distance and heard a weird, keening scream. He looked down at his watch: It was midnight. The battle had begun.

"Blimey, Harry," panted Hagrid, "this is it, eh? Time ter fight?"

"Hagrid, where have you come from?"

"Heard You-Know-Who from up in our cave," said Hagrid grimly. "Voice carried, didn' it? 'Yeh got till midnight ter gimme Potter.' Knew yeh mus' be here, knew what mus' be happenin'. Get *down,* Fang. So we come ter join in, me an' Grawpy an' Fang. Smashed our way through the boundary by the forest, Grawpy was carryin' us, Fang an' me. Told him ter let me down at the castle, so he shoved me through the window, bless him. Not exac'ly what I meant, bu' — where's Ron an' Hermione?"

"That," said Harry, "is a really good question. Come on."

They hurried together along the corridor, Fang lolloping beside them. Harry could hear movement through the corridors all around: running footsteps, shouts; through the windows, he could see more flashes of light in the dark grounds.

"Where're we goin'?" puffed Hagrid, pounding along at Harry's heels, making the floorboards quake.

"I dunno exactly," said Harry, making another random turn, "but Ron and Hermione must be around here somewhere. . . ."

The first casualties of the battle were already strewn across the passage ahead: The two stone gargoyles that usually guarded the entrance to the staffroom had been smashed apart by a jinx that had sailed through another broken window. Their remains stirred feebly on the floor, and as Harry leapt over one of their disembodied heads, it moaned faintly, "Oh, don't mind me . . . I'll just lie here and crumble. . . ."

Its ugly stone face made Harry think suddenly of the marble bust of

Rowena Ravenclaw at Xenophilius's house, wearing that mad headdress — and then of the statue in Ravenclaw Tower, with the stone diadem upon her white curls. . . .

And as he reached the end of the passage, the memory of a third stone effigy came back to him: that of an ugly old warlock, onto whose head Harry himself had placed a wig and a battered old tiara. The shock shot through Harry with the heat of firewhisky, and he nearly stumbled.

He knew, at last, where the Horcrux sat waiting for him. . . .

Tom Riddle, who confided in no one and operated alone, might have been arrogant enough to assume that he, and only he, had penetrated the deepest mysteries of Hogwarts Castle. Of course, Dumbledore and Flitwick, those model pupils, had never set foot in that particular place, but he, Harry, had strayed off the beaten track in his time at school — here at last was a secret he and Voldemort knew, that Dumbledore had never discovered —

He was roused by Professor Sprout, who was thundering past followed by Neville and half a dozen others, all of them wearing earmuffs and carrying what appeared to be large potted plants.

"Mandrakes!" Neville bellowed at Harry over his shoulder as he ran. "Going to lob them over the walls — they won't like this!"

Harry knew now where to go: He sped off, with Hagrid and Fang galloping behind him. They passed portrait after portrait, and the painted figures raced alongside them, wizards and witches in ruffs and breeches, in armor and cloaks, cramming themselves into each others' canvases, screaming news from other parts of the castle. As they reached the end of this corridor, the whole castle shook, and

Harry knew, as a gigantic vase blew off its plinth with explosive force, that it was in the grip of enchantments more sinister than those of the teachers and the Order.

"It's all righ', Fang — it's all righ'!" yelled Hagrid, but the great boarhound had taken flight as slivers of china flew like shrapnel through the air, and Hagrid pounded off after the terrified dog, leaving Harry alone.

He forged on through the trembling passages, his wand at the ready, and for the length of one corridor the little painted knight, Sir Cadogan, rushed from painting to painting beside him, clanking along in his armor, screaming encouragement, his fat little pony cantering behind him.

"Braggarts and rogues, dogs and scoundrels, drive them out, Harry Potter, see them off!"

Harry hurtled around a corner and found Fred and a small knot of students, including Lee Jordan and Hannah Abbott, standing beside another empty plinth, whose statue had concealed a secret passageway. Their wands were drawn and they were listening at the concealed hole.

"Nice night for it!" Fred shouted as the castle quaked again, and Harry sprinted by, elated and terrified in equal measure. Along yet another corridor he dashed, and then there were owls everywhere, and Mrs. Norris was hissing and trying to bat them with her paws, no doubt to return them to their proper place. . . .

"Potter!"

Aberforth Dumbledore stood blocking the corridor ahead, his wand held ready.

"I've had hundreds of kids thundering through my pub, Potter!"

"I know, we're evacuating," Harry said, "Voldemort's —"

"— attacking because they haven't handed you over, yeah," said Aberforth, "I'm not deaf, the whole of Hogsmeade heard him. And it never occurred to any of you to keep a few Slytherins hostage? There are kids of Death Eaters you've just sent to safety. Wouldn't it have been a bit smarter to keep 'em here?"

"It wouldn't stop Voldemort," said Harry, "and your brother would never have done it."

Aberforth grunted and tore away in the opposite direction.

Your brother would never have done it . . . Well, it was the truth, Harry thought as he ran on again; Dumbledore, who had defended Snape for so long, would never have held students ransom. . . .

And then he skidded around a final corner and with a yell of mingled relief and fury he saw them: Ron and Hermione, both with their arms full of large, curved, dirty yellow objects, Ron with a broomstick under his arm.

"Where the *hell* have you been?" Harry shouted.

"Chamber of Secrets," said Ron.

"Chamber — *what*?" said Harry, coming to an unsteady halt before them.

"It was Ron, all Ron's idea!" said Hermione breathlessly. "Wasn't it absolutely brilliant? There we were, after you left, and I said to Ron, even if we find the other one, how are we going to get rid of it? We still hadn't got rid of the cup! And then he thought of it! The basilisk!"

"What the — ?"

"Something to get rid of Horcruxes," said Ron simply.

Harry's eyes dropped to the objects clutched in Ron and Hermione's arms: great curved fangs, torn, he now realized, from the skull of a dead basilisk.

"But how did you get in there?" he asked, staring from the fangs to Ron. "You need to speak Parseltongue!"

"He did!" whispered Hermione. "Show him, Ron!"

Ron made a horrible strangled hissing noise.

"It's what you did to open the locket," he told Harry apologetically. "I had to have a few goes to get it right, but," he shrugged modestly, "we got there in the end."

"He was *amazing*!" said Hermione. "Amazing!"

"So . . ." Harry was struggling to keep up. "So . . ."

"So we're another Horcrux down," said Ron, and from under his jacket he pulled the mangled remains of Hufflepuff's cup. "Hermione stabbed it. Thought she should. She hasn't had the pleasure yet."

"Genius!" yelled Harry.

"It was nothing," said Ron, though he looked delighted with himself. "So what's new with you?"

As he said it, there was an explosion from overhead: All three of them looked up as dust fell from the ceiling and they heard a distant scream.

"I know what the diadem looks like, and I know where it is," said Harry, talking fast. "He hid it exactly where I hid my old Potions book, where everyone's been hiding stuff for centuries. He thought he was the only one to find it. Come on."

As the walls trembled again, he led the other two back through the

concealed entrance and down the staircase into the Room of Requirement. It was empty except for three women: Ginny, Tonks, and an elderly witch wearing a moth-eaten hat, whom Harry recognized immediately as Neville's grandmother.

"Ah, Potter," she said crisply as if she had been waiting for him. "You can tell us what's going on."

"Is everyone okay?" said Ginny and Tonks together.

"'S far as we know," said Harry. "Are there still people in the passage to the Hog's Head?"

He knew that the room would not be able to transform while there were still users inside it.

"I was the last to come through," said Mrs. Longbottom. "I sealed it, I think it unwise to leave it open now Aberforth has left his pub. Have you seen my grandson?"

"He's fighting," said Harry.

"Naturally," said the old lady proudly. "Excuse me, I must go and assist him."

With surprising speed she trotted off toward the stone steps.

Harry looked at Tonks.

"I thought you were supposed to be with Teddy at your mother's?"

"I couldn't stand not knowing —" Tonks looked anguished. "She'll look after him — have you seen Remus?"

"He was planning to lead a group of fighters into the grounds —"

Without another word, Tonks sped off.

"Ginny," said Harry, "I'm sorry, but we need you to leave too. Just for a bit. Then you can come back in."

Ginny looked simply delighted to leave her sanctuary.

"And then you can come back in!" he shouted after her as she ran up the steps after Tonks. *"You've got to come back in!"*

"Hang on a moment!" said Ron sharply. "We've forgotten someone!"

"Who?" asked Hermione.

"The house-elves, they'll all be down in the kitchen, won't they?"

"You mean we ought to get them fighting?" asked Harry.

"No," said Ron seriously, "I mean we should tell them to get out. We don't want any more Dobbies, do we? We can't order them to die for us —"

There was a clatter as the basilisk fangs cascaded out of Hermione's arms. Running at Ron, she flung them around his neck and kissed him full on the mouth. Ron threw away the fangs and broomstick he was holding and responded with such enthusiasm that he lifted Hermione off her feet.

"Is this the moment?" Harry asked weakly, and when nothing happened except that Ron and Hermione gripped each other still more firmly and swayed on the spot, he raised his voice. "OI! There's a war going on here!"

Ron and Hermione broke apart, their arms still around each other.

"I know, mate," said Ron, who looked as though he had recently been hit on the back of the head with a Bludger, "so it's now or never, isn't it?"

"Never mind that, what about the Horcrux?" Harry shouted. "D'you think you could just — just hold it in until we've got the diadem?"

"Yeah — right — sorry —" said Ron, and he and Hermione set about gathering up fangs, both pink in the face.

It was clear, as the three of them stepped back into the corridor upstairs, that in the minutes that they had spent in the Room of Requirement the situation within the castle had deteriorated severely: The walls and ceiling were shaking worse than ever; dust filled the air, and through the nearest window, Harry saw bursts of green and red light so close to the foot of the castle that he knew the Death Eaters must be very near to entering the place. Looking down, Harry saw Grawp the giant meandering past, swinging what looked like a stone gargoyle torn from the roof and roaring his displeasure.

"Let's hope he steps on some of them!" said Ron as more screams echoed from close by.

"As long as it's not any of our lot!" said a voice: Harry turned and saw Ginny and Tonks, both with their wands drawn at the next window, which was missing several panes. Even as he watched, Ginny sent a well-aimed jinx into a crowd of fighters below.

"Good girl!" roared a figure running through the dust toward them, and Harry saw Aberforth again, his gray hair flying as he led a small group of students past. "They look like they might be breaching the north battlements, they've brought giants of their own!"

"Have you seen Remus?" Tonks called after him.

"He was dueling Dolohov," shouted Aberforth, "haven't seen him since!"

"Tonks," said Ginny, "Tonks, I'm sure he's okay —"

But Tonks had run off into the dust after Aberforth.

Ginny turned, helpless, to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"They'll be all right," said Harry, though he knew they were empty words. "Ginny, we'll be back in a moment, just keep out of the way, keep safe — come on!" he said to Ron and Hermione, and they ran back to the stretch of wall beyond which the Room of Requirement was waiting to do the bidding of the next entrant.

I need the place where everything is hidden, Harry begged of it inside his head, and the door materialized on their third run past.

The furor of the battle died the moment they crossed the threshold and closed the door behind them: All was silent. They were in a place the size of a cathedral with the appearance of a city, its towering walls built of objects hidden by thousands of long-gone students.

"And he never realized *anyone* could get in?" said Ron, his voice echoing in the silence.

"He thought he was the only one," said Harry. "Too bad for him I've had to hide stuff in my time . . . this way," he added, "I think it's down here. . . ."

He passed the stuffed troll and the Vanishing Cabinet Draco Malfoy had mended last year with such disastrous consequences, then hesitated, looking up and down aisles of junk; he could not remember where to go next. . . .

"Accio Diadem!" cried Hermione in desperation, but nothing flew through the air toward them. It seemed that, like the vault at Gringotts, the room would not yield its hidden objects that easily.

"Let's split up," Harry told the other two. "Look for a stone bust of an old man wearing a wig and a tiara! It's standing on a cupboard and it's definitely somewhere near here. . . ."

They sped off up adjacent aisles; Harry could hear the others' footsteps echoing through the towering piles of junk, of bottles, hats, crates, chairs, books, weapons, broomsticks, bats. . . .

"Somewhere near here," Harry muttered to himself. "Somewhere . . . somewhere . . ."

Deeper and deeper into the labyrinth he went, looking for objects he recognized from his one previous trip into the room. His breath was loud in his ears, and then his very soul seemed to shiver: There it was, right ahead, the blistered old cupboard in which he had hidden his old Potions book, and on top of it, the pockmarked stone warlock wearing a dusty old wig and what looked like an ancient, discolored tiara.

He had already stretched out his hand, though he remained ten feet away, when a voice behind him said, "Hold it, Potter."

He skidded to a halt and turned around. Crabbe and Goyle were standing behind him, shoulder to shoulder, wands pointing right at Harry. Through the small space between their jeering faces he saw Draco Malfoy.

"That's my wand you're holding, Potter," said Malfoy, pointing his own through the gap between Crabbe and Goyle.

"Not anymore," panted Harry, tightening his grip on the hawthorn wand. "Winners, keepers, Malfoy. Who's lent you theirs?"

"My mother," said Draco.

Harry laughed, though there was nothing very humorous about the situation. He could not hear Ron or Hermione anymore. They seemed to have run out of earshot, searching for the diadem.

"So how come you three aren't with Voldemort?" asked Harry.

“We’re gonna be rewarded,” said Crabbe: His voice was surprisingly soft for such an enormous person; Harry had hardly ever heard him speak before. Crabbe was smiling like a small child promised a large bag of sweets. “We ’ung back, Potter. We decided not to go. Decided to bring you to ’im.”

“Good plan,” said Harry in mock admiration. He could not believe that he was this close, and was going to be thwarted by Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. He began edging slowly backward toward the place where the Horcrux sat lopsided upon the bust. If he could just get his hands on it before the fight broke out . . .

“So how did you get in here?” he asked, trying to distract them.

“I virtually lived in the Room of Hidden Things all last year,” said Malfoy, his voice brittle. “I know how to get in.”

“We was hiding in the corridor outside,” grunted Goyle. “We can do Diss-lusion Charms now! And then,” his face split into a gormless grin, “you turned up right in front of us and said you was looking for a die-dum! What’s a die-dum?”

“Harry?” Ron’s voice echoed suddenly from the other side of the wall to Harry’s right. “Are you talking to someone?”

With a whiplike movement, Crabbe pointed his wand at the fifty-foot mountain of old furniture, of broken trunks, of old books and robes and unidentifiable junk, and shouted, *“Descendo!”*

The wall began to totter, then the top third crumbled into the aisle next door where Ron stood.

“Ron!” Harry bellowed, as somewhere out of sight Hermione screamed, and Harry heard innumerable objects crashing to the floor on the other side of the destabilized wall: He pointed his wand at the

rampart, cried, "*Finite!*" and it steadied.

"No!" shouted Malfoy, staying Crabbe's arm as the latter made to repeat his spell. "If you wreck the room you might bury this diadem thing!"

"What's that matter?" said Crabbe, tugging himself free. "It's Potter the Dark Lord wants, who cares about a die-dum?"

"Potter came in here to get it," said Malfoy with ill-disguised impatience at the slow-wittedness of his colleagues, "so that must mean —"

"'Must mean'?" Crabbe turned on Malfoy with undisguised ferocity. "Who cares what you think? I don't take your orders no more, *Draco*. You an' your dad are finished."

"Harry?" shouted Ron again, from the other side of the junk wall. "What's going on?"

"Harry?" mimicked Crabbe. "What's going — *no,* Potter! *Crucio!*"

Harry had lunged for the tiara; Crabbe's curse missed him but hit the stone bust, which flew into the air; the diadem soared upward and then dropped out of sight in the mass of objects on which the bust had rested.

"STOP!" Malfoy shouted at Crabbe, his voice echoing through the enormous room. "The Dark Lord wants him alive —"

"So? I'm not killing him, am I?" yelled Crabbe, throwing off Malfoy's restraining arm. "But if I can, I will, the Dark Lord wants him dead anyway, what's the diff — ?"

A jet of scarlet light shot past Harry by inches: Hermione had run around the corner behind him and sent a Stunning Spell straight at

Crabbe's head. It only missed because Malfoy pulled him out of the way.

"It's that Mudblood! *Avada Kedavra!*"

Harry saw Hermione dive aside, and his fury that Crabbe had aimed to kill wiped all else from his mind. He shot a Stunning Spell at Crabbe, who lurched out of the way, knocking Malfoy's wand out of his hand; it rolled out of sight beneath a mountain of broken furniture and boxes.

"Don't kill him! DON'T KILL HIM!" Malfoy yelled at Crabbe and Goyle, who were both aiming at Harry: Their split second's hesitation was all Harry needed.

"Expelliarmus!"

Goyle's wand flew out of his hand and disappeared into the bulwark of objects beside him; Goyle leapt foolishly on the spot, trying to retrieve it; Malfoy jumped out of range of Hermione's second Stunning Spell, and Ron, appearing suddenly at the end of the aisle, shot a full Body-Bind Curse at Crabbe, which narrowly missed.

Crabbe wheeled around and screamed, *"Avada Kedavra!"* again. Ron leapt out of sight to avoid the jet of green light. The wandless Malfoy cowered behind a three-legged wardrobe as Hermione charged toward them, hitting Goyle with a Stunning Spell as she came.

"It's somewhere here!" Harry yelled at her, pointing at the pile of junk into which the old tiara had fallen. "Look for it while I go and help R —"

"HARRY!" she screamed.

A roaring, billowing noise behind him gave him a moment's warning. He turned and saw both Ron and Crabbe running as hard as they could up the aisle toward them.

"Like it hot, scum?" roared Crabbe as he ran.

But he seemed to have no control over what he had done. Flames of abnormal size were pursuing them, licking up the sides of the junk bulwarks, which were crumbling to soot at their touch.

"Aguamenti!" Harry bawled, but the jet of water that soared from the tip of his wand evaporated in the air.

"RUN!"

Malfoy grabbed the Stunned Goyle and dragged him along; Crabbe outstripped all of them, now looking terrified; Harry, Ron, and Hermione pelted along in his wake, and the fire pursued them. It was not normal fire; Crabbe had used a curse of which Harry had no knowledge: As they turned a corner the flames chased them as though they were alive, sentient, intent upon killing them. Now the fire was mutating, forming a gigantic pack of fiery beasts: Flaming serpents, chimaeras, and dragons rose and fell and rose again, and the detritus of centuries on which they were feeding was thrown up in the air into their fanged mouths, tossed high on clawed feet, before being consumed by the inferno.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had vanished from view: Harry, Ron, and Hermione stopped dead; the fiery monsters were circling them, drawing closer and closer, claws and horns and tails lashed, and the heat was solid as a wall around them.

"What can we do?" Hermione screamed over the deafening roars of the fire. "What can we do?"

"Here!"

Harry seized a pair of heavy-looking broomsticks from the nearest pile of junk and threw one to Ron, who pulled Hermione onto it behind him. Harry swung his leg over the second broom and, with hard kicks to the ground, they soared up into the air, missing by feet the horned beak of a flaming raptor that snapped its jaws at them. The smoke and heat were becoming overwhelming: Below them the cursed fire was consuming the contraband of generations of hunted students, the guilty outcomes of a thousand banned experiments, the secrets of the countless souls who had sought refuge in the room. Harry could not see a trace of Malfoy, Crabbe, or Goyle anywhere: He swooped as low as he dared over the marauding monsters of flame to try to find them, but there was nothing but fire: What a terrible way to die. . . . He had never wanted this. . . .

"Harry, let's get out, let's get out!" bellowed Ron, though it was impossible to see where the door was through the black smoke.

And then Harry heard a thin, piteous human scream from amidst the terrible commotion, the thunder of devouring flame.

"It's — too — dangerous — !" Ron yelled, but Harry wheeled in the air. His glasses giving his eyes some small protection from the smoke, he raked the firestorm below, seeking a sign of life, a limb or a face that was not yet charred like wood. . . .

And he saw them: Malfoy with his arms around the unconscious Goyle, the pair of them perched on a fragile tower of charred desks, and Harry dived. Malfoy saw him coming and raised one arm, but even as Harry grasped it he knew at once that it was no good: Goyle was too heavy and Malfoy's hand, covered in sweat, slid instantly

out of Harry's —

"IF WE DIE FOR THEM, I'LL KILL YOU, HARRY!" roared Ron's voice, and, as a great flaming chimaera bore down upon them, he and Hermione dragged Goyle onto their broom and rose, rolling and pitching, into the air once more as Malfoy clambered up behind Harry.

"The door, get to the door, the door!" screamed Malfoy in Harry's ear, and Harry sped up, following Ron, Hermione, and Goyle through the billowing black smoke, hardly able to breathe: and all around them the last few objects unburned by the devouring flames were flung into the air, as the creatures of the cursed fire cast them high in celebration: cups and shields, a sparkling necklace, and an old, discolored tiara —

"What are you doing, what are you doing, the door's that way!" screamed Malfoy, but Harry made a hairpin swerve and dived. The diadem seemed to fall in slow motion, turning and glittering as it dropped toward the maw of a yawning serpent, and then he had it, caught it around his wrist —

Harry swerved again as the serpent lunged at him; he soared upward and straight toward the place where, he prayed, the door stood open: Ron, Hermione, and Goyle had vanished; Malfoy was screaming and holding Harry so tightly it hurt. Then, through the smoke, Harry saw a rectangular patch on the wall and steered the broom at it, and moments later clean air filled his lungs and they collided with the wall in the corridor beyond.

Malfoy fell off the broom and lay facedown, gasping, coughing, and retching. Harry rolled over and sat up: The door to the Room of

Requirement had vanished, and Ron and Hermione sat panting on the floor beside Goyle, who was still unconscious.

"C-Crabbe," choked Malfoy as soon as he could speak. "C-Crabbe . . ."

"He's dead," said Ron harshly.

There was silence, apart from panting and coughing. Then a number of huge bangs shook the castle, and a great cavalcade of transparent figures galloped past on horses, their heads screaming with bloodlust under their arms. Harry staggered to his feet when the Headless Hunt had passed and looked around: The battle was still going on all around him. He could hear more screams than those of the retreating ghosts. Panic flared within him.

"Where's Ginny?" he said sharply. "She was here. She was supposed to be going back into the Room of Requirement."

"Blimey, d'you reckon it'll still work after that fire?" asked Ron, but he too got to his feet, rubbing his chest and looking left and right. "Shall we split up and look — ?"

"No," said Hermione, getting to her feet too. Malfoy and Goyle remained slumped hopelessly on the corridor floor; neither of them had wands. "Let's stick together. I say we go — Harry, what's that on your arm?"

"What? Oh yeah —"

He pulled the diadem from his wrist and held it up. It was still hot, blackened with soot, but as he looked at it closely he was just able to make out the tiny words etched upon it: WIT BEYOND MEASURE IS MAN'S GREATEST TREASURE.

A bloodlike substance, dark and tarry, seemed to be leaking from

the diadem. Suddenly Harry felt the thing vibrate violently, then break apart in his hands, and as it did so, he thought he heard the faintest, most distant scream of pain, echoing not from the grounds or the castle, but from the thing that had just fragmented in his fingers.

"It must have been Fiendfyre!" whimpered Hermione, her eyes on the broken pieces.

"Sorry?"

"Fiendfyre — cursed fire — it's one of the substances that destroy Horcruxes, but I would never, ever have dared use it, it's so dangerous — how did Crabbe know how to — ?"

"Must've learned from the Carrows," said Harry grimly.

"Shame he wasn't concentrating when they mentioned how to stop it, really," said Ron, whose hair, like Hermione's, was singed, and whose face was blackened. "If he hadn't tried to kill us all, I'd be quite sorry he was dead."

"But don't you realize?" whispered Hermione. "This means, if we can just get the snake —"

But she broke off as yells and shouts and the unmistakable noises of dueling filled the corridor. Harry looked around and his heart seemed to fail: Death Eaters had penetrated Hogwarts. Fred and Percy had just backed into view, both of them dueling masked and hooded men.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione ran forward to help: Jets of light flew in every direction and the man dueling Percy backed off, fast: Then his hood slipped and they saw a high forehead and streaked hair —

"Hello, Minister!" bellowed Percy, sending a neat jinx straight at Thicknesse, who dropped his wand and clawed at the front of his

robes, apparently in awful discomfort. "Did I mention I'm resigning?"

"You're joking, Perce!" shouted Fred as the Death Eater he was battling collapsed under the weight of three separate Stunning Spells. Thicknesse had fallen to the ground with tiny spikes erupting all over him; he seemed to be turning into some form of sea urchin. Fred looked at Percy with glee.

"You actually *are* joking, Perce. . . . I don't think I've heard you joke since you were —"

The air exploded. They had been grouped together, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, and Percy, the two Death Eaters at their feet, one Stunned, the other Transfigured; and in that fragment of a moment, when danger seemed temporarily at bay, the world was rent apart. Harry felt himself flying through the air, and all he could do was hold as tightly as possible to that thin stick of wood that was his one and only weapon, and shield his head in his arms: He heard the screams and yells of his companions without a hope of knowing what had happened to them —

And then the world resolved itself into pain and semidarkness: He was half buried in the wreckage of a corridor that had been subjected to a terrible attack. Cold air told him that the side of the castle had been blown away, and hot stickiness on his cheek told him that he was bleeding copiously. Then he heard a terrible cry that pulled at his insides, that expressed agony of a kind neither flame nor curse could cause, and he stood up, swaying, more frightened than he had been that day, more frightened, perhaps, than he had been in his life. . . .

And Hermione was struggling to her feet in the wreckage, and three redheaded men were grouped on the ground where the wall had blasted apart. Harry grabbed Hermione's hand as they staggered and stumbled over stone and wood.

"No — no — no!" someone was shouting. "No! Fred! No!"

And Percy was shaking his brother, and Ron was kneeling beside them, and Fred's eyes stared without seeing, the ghost of his last laugh still etched upon his face.

— HOOFSTUK EEN-EN-DERTIG —

Die Slag van Hogwarts

Die Groot Saal se betowerde plafon is donker en met sterre besaai, en daaronder sit verkreukelde studente, party in reismantels, ander in kamerjasse, om die vier huise se tafels ingeryg. Hier en daar skyn die skoolspoke se pêrelwit figure. Almal se oë, lewend en dood, is vasgenael op professor McGonagall, wat die skool vanaf die platform aan die bopunt van die Saal toespreek. Agter haar staan die oorblywende onderwysers, asook die palomino-sentour, Firenze, en die lede van die Orde van die Feniks wat kom veg het.

". . . ontruiming sal onder toesig van meneer Filch en madame Pomfrey plaasvind. Prefekte, wanneer ek die bevel gee, sal julle jul huis organiseer en diegene wat aan julle toevertrou is op 'n ordelike wyse na die ontruimingspunt toe neem."

Baie van die studente lyk angsbevange. Maar terwyl Harry teen die muur langs afbeweeg en die Gryffindor-tafel fynkam vir Ron en Hermione, staan Ernie Macmillan by Hoesenproes se tafel op en roep: "En wat as ons wil bly om te baklei?"

Daar is 'n oomblik van stilte.

"As jy mondig is, mag jy bly," sê professor McGonagall.

"Wat van ons goed?" roep 'n meisie van Raweklou se tafel af. "Ons trommels, ons uile?"

"Ons het nie tyd om besittings te gaan haal nie," sê professor McGonagall. "Die belangrikste ding is om julle veilig hier uit te kry."

"Waar's professor Snape?" vra 'n meisie aan die Slytherin-tafel.

"Hy het, om dit prontuit te stel, gedros," antwoord professor McGonagall en 'n dawerende gejuig bars los in die Gryffindors, Hoesenproesers en Rawekklouers se geledere.

Harry beweeg al met die Gryffindor-tafel langs in die Saal af, steeds op soek na Ron en Hermione. Terwyl hy verbyloop, draai gesigte in sy rigting en 'n groot gefluister vind agter hom plaas.

"Ons het reeds beskerming om die kasteel geplaas," is professor McGonagall besig om te sê, "maar dit sal waarskynlik nie baie lank

hou nie, tensy ons dit versterk. Ek moet julle dus versoek om vinnig en kalm te beweeg en te doen wat julle prefekte –"

Maar haar laaste woorde gaan verlore toe 'n ander stem deur die Saal weergalm. Dit is hoog, koud en helder: dit is onmoontlik om te sê waar dit vandaan kom; dit is asof dit uit die mure kom. Net soos die monster wat dit eens beheer het, lê dit dalk al eeue lank sluimerend daar.

"Ek weet julle maak gereed om te veg." Daar is histerie onder die studente; party van hulle gryp mekaar vas en kyk beangs rond om te sien waar die klank vandaan kom. "Julle moeite is tevergeefs. Julle kan nie teen my veg nie. Ek wil julle nie doodmaak nie. Ek het groot respek vir Hogwarts se onderwysers. Ek wil nie towerbloed verspil nie."

Daar is nou stilte in die Saal, die soort stilte wat teen trommelvliese druk, wat te oorweldigend is om deur mure ingehou te word.

"Gee Harry Potter vir my," sê Voldemort se stem, "en niemand sal seerkry nie. Gee Harry Potter vir my en ek sal die skool onaangeraak laat. Gee Harry Potter vir my en julle sal beloon word.

"Julle het tot middernag."

Die stilte sluk hulle almal weer in. Al wat 'n kop is, draai; al wat 'n oog in die plek is, het Harry skynbaar gevind en hou hom nou in die fel skynsel van duisende onsigbare strale vasgevries. Dan kom iemand regop aan die Slytherin-tafel en hy herken Pansy Parkinson toe sy 'n bewende arm lig en skree: "Maar daar's hy! *Daar's* Potter! Iemand, gryp hom!"

Voor Harry kan praat, is daar 'n massiewe beweging. Die Gryffindors voor hom het opgestaan en draai, nie na Harry toe nie, maar na die Slytherins. Dan kom die Hoesenproesers regop en amper op dieselfde oomblik die Raweklouers, almal met hulle rûe na Harry, almal na Pansy toe gedraai, en Harry kyk sprakeloos en oorweldig hoe towerstawwe oral onder mantels en uit moue uitgehaal word.

"Dankie, juffrou Parkinson," sê professor McGonagall in 'n bytende stemtoon. "Jy sal die Saal eerste saam met meneer Filch verlaat. En die res van jou huis sal volg."

Harry hoor die geskuur van banke en dan die klank van die Slytherins wat aan die ander kant van die Saal uitloop.

"Raweklou volgende!" beveel professor McGonagall.

Die vier tafels raak stadig leeg. Slytherin se tafel is heeltemal verlate, maar 'n aantal ouer Raweklouers bly sit terwyl hulle huismaats in rye uitloop: selfs nog meer Hoesenproesers bly agter, en die helfte van Gryffindor bly sit, wat professor McGonagall verplig om die onderwysers se platform te verlaat en die minderjariges uit te jaag.

"Volstrek nie, Creevy, loop! *En* jy, Peakes!"

Harry haas hom na die Weasleys wat almal saam aan die Gryffindor-tafel sit.

"Waar is Ron en Hermione?"

"Het jy hulle nog nie gekry –?" begin 'n bekommerde meneer Weasley.

Maar hy sluk sy woorde toe Kingsley vorentoe tree en op die platform gaan staan om dié wat agtergebly het, toe te spreek.

"Ons het net 'n halfuur tot middernag, so ons moet vinnig optree! Hogwarts se onderwysers en die Orde van die Feniks het op 'n gevegsplan ooreengekom. Professors Flitwick, Sprout en McGonagall gaan groepe vegters opneem na die drie hoogste Torings – Raweklou, Sterrekunde en Gryffindor – van waar hulle 'n goeie uitsig en uitstekende posisies sal hê om towerspreuke af te vuur. Intussen sal Remus," hy wys Lupin uit, "Arthur," hy beduie na meneer Weasley wat aan die Gryffindor-tafel sit, "en ek groepe onder op die terrein uitneem. Ons sal iemand nodig hê om die uitgange van die tonnels wat na die skool toe lei se verdediging te organiseer –"

"– klink soos 'n joppie vir ons," roep Fred uit terwyl hy na homself en George wys, en Kingsley knik instemmend.

"Reg, leiers hierbo sodat ons die troepe kan verdeel!"

"Potter!" Professor McGonagall kom haastig na Harry toe terwyl die studente die platform oorstroom, mekaar verdring vir staanplek en instruksies kry. *"Is jy nie veronderstel om na iets te soek nie?"*

"Wat? O," sê Harry, "o ja!"

Hy het amper van die Horcrux vergeet, amper vergeet die geveg gaan plaasvind sodat hy daarna kan soek: Ron en Hermione se onverklaarbare afwesigheid het 'n oomblik lank alle ander gedagtes uit sy kop verdryf.

"Nou doen dit dan, Potter, weg is jy!"

"Reg – ja –"

Hy voel hoe oë hom volg terwyl hy weer by die Groot Saal uithardloop na die Ingangsportaal wat steeds vol studente is wat weggeneem gaan word. Hy beweeg saam met die stroom by die marmertrap op, maar aan die bokant glip hy vinnig by 'n verlate gang af. Vrees en paniek vertroebel sy denke. Hy probeer homself kalmeer, probeer daarop konsentreer om die Horcrux te kry, maar sy gedagtes zoem so wild en vrugteloos rond soos perdebye wat onder 'n glas vasgevang is. Sonder Ron en Hermione se hulp is dit asof hy sy idees nie kan orden nie. Hy loop stadig, kom halfpad by 'n leë gang af tot stilstand, gaan sit op die voetstuk van 'n standbeeld wat verdwyn het en haal die Plunderaar se Kaart uit

die sakkie om sy nek. Hy kan Ron en Hermione se name nêrens daarop sien nie, maar die digte skare kolletjies wat nou na die Vertrek van Vereistes toe beweeg, mag hulle dalk verberg. Hy sit die kaart weg, druk sy hande oor sy gesig, maak sy oë toe en probeer konsentreer . . .

Voldemort het gedink ek sal na Raweklou se Toring toe gaan.

Daar is dit: 'n soliede feit, die plek waar hy moet begin. Voldemort het Alecto Carrow in Raweklou se geselskamer gestasioneer, en daar kan net een verklaring daarvoor wees: Voldemort was bang Harry weet reeds sy Horcrux hou met daardie huis verband.

Maar die enigste voorwerp wat enigiemand blykbaar met Raweklou assosieer, is die verlore diadeem . . . en hoe kan die Horcrux die diadeem wees? Hoe is dit moontlik dat Voldemort, 'n Slytherin, die diadeem gekry het wat geslagte Raweklouers al ontwyk? Wie kon vir hom gesê het waar om te soek as niemand in menseheugenis die diadeem nog gesien het nie?

In menseheugenis . . .

Onder sy vingers vlieg Harry se oë weer oop. Hy spring van die voetstuk af op en nael terug soos wat hy gekom het, nou agter sy een laaste hoop aan. Die geluid van honderde mense wat na die Vertrek van Vereistes toe beweeg word harder en harder terwyl hy na die marmertrap toe teruggaan. Prefekte roep instruksies uit en probeer op die studente in hulle huise se spoor bly; daar is 'n groot gestamp en gestoot; Harry sien hoe Zacharias Smith eerstejaartjies onderstebo loop om voor in die ry te kom; hier en daar is van die jonger studente in trane terwyl oueres desperaat na vriende of broers en susters roep . . .

Harry bespeur 'n pêrelwit figuur wat onder oor die Ingangsportaal rondsweef en skree so hard as wat hy kan bo die lawaai.

"Nick! NICK! Ek moet met jou praat!"

Hy baan vir hom 'n pad deur die gety studente en kom uiteindelik aan die onderkant van die trap waar Nick-Amper-Sonder-Kop hom inwag.

"Harry! My liewe seun!"

Nick probeer Harry se hande in albei syne vasvat: dit voel of hulle in yswater gedruk word.

"Nick, jy moet my help. Wie's Raweklou-toring se spook?"

Nick-Amper-Sonder-Kop lyk verras en 'n bietjie beledig.

"Die Grys Dame, natuurlik; maar as jy 'n spook se dienste benodig –?"

"Dit moet sy wees – weet jy waar sy is?"

"Laat ons sien . . ."

Nick se kop kantel effens op sy plooikraag terwyl hy dit heen en weer draai soos hy oor die wemelende studente se koppe rondkyk. "Dis sy daardie, Harry, die jong vrou met die lang hare."

Harry kyk in die rigting waarna Nick se deurskynende vinger wys en sien 'n lang spook wat agterkom Harry staar haar aan en met geligte wenkbroue deur 'n soliede muur wegdryf.

Harry hardloop agter haar aan. Hy gaan in by die deur na die gang waarheen sy verdwyn het en sien haar reg aan die einde daarvan; sy gly nog steeds gladweg van hom af.

"Hei – wag – kom terug!"

Sy luister na hom en sweef 'n entjie bokant die grond. Harry veronderstel sy is mooi, met hare wat tot op haar middel hang en haar mantel wat tot op die vloer hang, maar sy lyk ook hooghartig en trots. Toe hy naby kom, herken hy haar as 'n spook verby wie hy 'n hele paar keer in die gang geloop het, maar met wie hy nooit gepraat het nie.

"Is jy die Grys Dame?"

Sy knik, maar praat nie.

"Raweklou-toring se spook?"

"Dit is korrek."

Haar stemtoon is nie bemoedigend nie.

"Asseblief, ek het hulp nodig. Ek moet alles weet wat jy my van die verlore diadeem kan vertel."

'n Koue glimlag laat haar lippe opkrul.

"Ek is bevrees," sê sy en draai weg, gereed om te gaan, "ek kan jou nie help nie."

"WAG!"

Hy het nie bedoel om te skree nie, maar woede en paniek dreig om hom te oorweldig. Hy loer na sy horlosie terwyl sy voor hom in die lug hang: dit is 'n kwartier voor middernag.

"Dit is dringend," sê hy vurig. "As daardie diadeem hier in Hogwarts is, moet ek dit kry, vinnig."

"Jy is beswaarlik die eerste student wat die diadeem begeer," sê sy minagtend. "Geslagte studente het my lastig geval –"

"Dit gaan nie hier oor beter punte te probeer kry nie!" skree Harry. "Dit gaan oor Voldemort – oor Voldemort wat verslaan moet word – of stel jy nie daarin belang nie?"

Sy kan nie bloos nie, maar haar deurskynende wange word minder deursigtig en haar stem is iesegrimmig toe sy antwoord: "Natuurlik gee ek om – hoe durf jy insinueer –?"

"Wel, help my dan!"

Sy begin haar selfbeheersing verloor.

"Dit – dit is nie 'n kwessie van –" stotter sy. "My ma se diadeem –"
"Jou *ma* s'n?"
Sy lyk kwaad vir haarself.
"Toe ek gelewe het," sê sy styf, "was ek Helena Raweklou."
"Jy's haar *dogter*? Maar dan moet jy mos weet wat daarvan geword het!"
"Hoewel die diadeem wysheid skenk," sê sy met 'n duidelike poging om haar reg te ruk, "twyfel ek of dit jou kanse veel sal verbeter om 'n oorwinning te behaal oor die towenaar wat homself die Heer –"
"Het ek nie nou net vir jou gesê ek stel nie daarin belang om dit te dra nie!" sê Harry ontstoke. "Daar's nie tyd om te verduidelik nie – maar as jy vir Hogwarts omgee, as jy wil hê Voldemort moet verslaan word, dan moet jy my alles vertel wat jy van die diadeem af weet!"
Sy sê nie 'n woord nie, sweef net in die lug en staar af na hom, en 'n gevoel van wanhoop oorval Harry. As sy enigiets geweet het, sou sy dit natuurlik vir Flitwick of Dumbledore vertel het; hulle sou haar tog sekerlik dieselfde vraag gevra het. Hy skud sy kop en wil omdraai, maar dan praat sy in 'n lae stem.
"Ek het die diadeem by my ma gesteel."
"Jy – jy het wat gedoen?"
"Ek het die diadeem gesteel," herhaal Helena Raweklou in 'n fluisterstem. "Ek wou slimmer en belangriker as my ma wees. Toe loop ek daarmee weg."
Hy weet nie hoe hy dit reggekry het om haar vertroue te wen nie en hy vra ook nie: hy luister net aandagtig terwyl sy voortgaan. "Hulle sê my ma het nooit erken die diadeem is weg nie; sy het voorgegee sy het dit nog steeds. Sy het haar verlies en my afgryslike verraad weggesteek, selfs vir Hogwarts se ander stigters.
"En toe word my ma siek – dodelik siek. Ten spyte van my bedrog was sy desperaat om my nog een keer te sien. Sy het 'n man wat lank reeds lief vir my was, hoewel ek sy toenadering van die hand gewys het, gestuur om my te gaan soek. Sy het geweet hy sou nie rus tot hy my kry nie."
Harry wag. Sy haal diep asem en gooi haar kop agteroor.
"Hy het my opgespoor in die woud waar ek geskuil het. Toe ek weier om saam met hom terug te kom, het hy gewelddadig geraak. Die Baron was altyd 'n opvlieënde man. Woedend omdat ek geweier het, jaloers omdat ek vry was, het hy my doodgesteek."
"Die *Baron*? Jy bedoel –?"
"Die Bloedige Baron, ja," sê die Grys Dame en sy trek die man-

tel wat sy dra weg en wys vir hom 'n enkele donker wond in haar wit borskas. "Toe hy sien wat hy gedoen het, was hy oorstelp van berou. Hy neem toe die wapen wat my lewe geëis het en gebruik dit om homself dood te maak. Ná al hierdie eeue dra hy sy kettings nog steeds as 'n daad van boetedoening . . . soos dit hoort," sê sy bitter.

"En . . . en die diadeem?"

"Dit het gebly waar ek dit weggesteek het toe ek die Baron deur die woud na my toe hoor aankom het. Versteek in 'n hol boom."

"'n Hol boom?" herhaal Harry. "Watter boom? Waar was dit?"

"'n Woud in Albanië. 'n Verlate plek wat ek gedink het ver buite my ma se bereik is."

"Albanië," herhaal Harry. Hy begin wonder bo wonder sin maak van al die verwarring, en nou verstaan hy hoekom sy dit wat sy van Flitwick en Dumbledore weerhou het, vir hom vertel. "Jy het hierdie storie al vir iemand vertel, nè? Vir 'n ander student?"

Sy maak haar oë toe en knik.

"Ek het nie . . . 'n benul gehad nie . . . Hy't my . . . gevlei. Dit was asof hy . . . verstaan . . . simpatiseer . . ."

Ja, dink Harry, Tom Riddle sou beslis begrip gehad het vir Helena Raweklou se begeerte om legendariese voorwerpe waarop sy skaars enige reg het, te besit.

"Wel, jy was nie die eerste mens uit wie Riddle 'n geheim getrek het nie," mompel Harry. "Hy kon sjarmant wees as hy wou . . ."

So Voldemort het dit reggekry om met mooipraatjies by die Grys Dame uit te vind waar die verlore diadeem is. Hy het na daardie verafgeleë woud toe gereis en die diadeem uit sy wegsteekplek verwyder, miskien net nadat hy by Hogwarts weg is, nog voor hy by Borgin en Burkes begin werk het.

En daardie afgeleë Albaniese woud sou mos 'n uitstekende toevlugsoord gewees het toe Voldemort veel later 'n plek nodig gehad het om laag te lê, ongehinderd, tien lange jare?

Maar toe die diadeem eers sy kosbare Horcrux geword het, het hy dit nie in daardie beskeie boom gelos nie . . . Nee, die diadeem is in die geheim terug na sy ware tuiste toe gebring, en Voldemort moet dit gedoen het –

"– die aand toe hy werk kom vra het!" maak Harry sy gedagte klaar.

"Ekskuus?"

"Hy het die diadeem in die kasteel kom wegsteek die aand toe hy vir Dumbledore gevra het om hom hier te laat skoolhou!" sê Harry. Om dit hardop te sê, stel Harry in staat om sin van dit alles te maak. "Hy moes die diadeem op pad op na, of op pad van,

Dumbledore se kantoor weggesteek het! Maar dit was nog steeds die moeite werd om die werk te probeer kry – dan kon hy dalk nog 'n kans kry om Gryffindor se swaard ook vas te lê – dankie, baie dankie!"

Harry laat haar swewend en totaal verdwaas agter. Terwyl hy om die hoek terug na die Ingangsportaal toe beweeg, kyk hy op sy horlosie. Dit is vyf minute voor middernag en alhoewel hy nou weet *wat* die laaste Horcrux is, is hy nog niks nader daaraan om uit te vind *waar* dit is nie . . .

Geslagte studente kon die diadeem nie kry nie; dit laat hom dink dit is nie in Raweklou se Toring nie – maar as dit nie daar is nie, waar is dit dan? Watter wegsteekplek het Tom Riddle binne Hogwarts ontdek wat hy gedink het vir ewig geheim sal bly?

Verdiep in desperate bespiegeling kom Harry om 'n hoek, maar hy het skaars 'n paar tree in die nuwe gang af gevorder toe die venster aan sy linkerkant met 'n oorverdowende knal aan skerwe spat. Terwyl hy eenkant toe spring, vlieg 'n reusagtige liggaam by die venster in en tref die oorkantse muur. Iets groots en harigs beweeg tjankend van die nuwe aankomeling af weg en storm op Harry af.

"Hagrid!" brul Harry en probeer Tande die beerhond se attensies afweer terwyl die enorme bebaarde figuur sukkelend op die been kom. "Wat de –?"

"Harry, jy's hier! *Jy's hier!*"

Hagrid buk af, gee vlugtig vir Harry 'n drukkie wat sy ribbes amper breek, en hardloop dan terug na die gebreekte venster toe.

"Mooi so, Ghroppie!" bulder hy deur die gat in die venster. "Ek sien jou nou-nou, soet wees, hoor!"

Agter Hagrid, diep in die donker nag, sien Harry ontploffings van lig in die verte en hoor 'n vreemde skreeu wat soos 'n weeklaag klink. Hy kyk op sy horlosie: dit is middernag. Die geveg het begin.

"Demmit, Harry," hyg Hagrid, "dis nou dit, nè? Tyd om te baklei?"

"Hagrid, waar kom jy vandaan?"

"Het Jy-Weet-Wie van doer bo in ons grot af gehoor," sê Hagrid stroef. "Sy stem het tot daar gedra. 'Julle't tot middernag om Potter vir my te gee.' Toe weet ek jy moet hier wees, toe weet ek wat aangaan. Nee, *af*, Tande. So toe kom help ons, ek en Ghroppie en Tande. Het deur die grens by die woud gebars; Ghroppie het ons gedra, vir my en vir Tande. Het gesê hy moet my by die kasteel neersit, toe prop hy my by die venster in, die liewe ding. Nie presies wat ek bedoel het nie, maar – waar's Ron en Hermione?"

"Dit," sê Harry, "is 'n baie goeie vraag. Komaan."

Hulle hardloop in die gang af met Tande wat langs Hagrid galop.

Harry hoor beweging in al die gange om hulle: hardlopende voetstappe, geskreeu; deur die vensters sien hy nog ligflitse oor die donker terrein.

"Waa'n'toe gaan ons?" hyg Hagrid wat die vloerplanke laat dril terwyl hy kort op Harry se hakke volg.

"Ek weet nie presies nie," sê Harry en draai dan weer na willekeur af, "maar Ron en Hermione moet hier iewers wees."

Die veldslag se eerste gesneuweldes lê reeds in die gang voor hulle gestrooi: die twee klipdrake wat gewoonlik die ingang na die personeelkamer bewaak, is uitmekaar geskiet deur 'n paljas wat deur 'n gebreekte venster ingeseil het. Hulle oorblyfsels roer lamlendig op die grond en terwyl Harry oor een van hulle ontliggaamde koppe spring, kerm dit floutjies: "O, moenie jou aan my steur nie . . . Ek sal maar net hier lê en verkrummel . . ."

Die lelike klipgesig laat Harry skielik aan die marmerborsbeeld van Rowena Raweklou in Zenophilius se huis dink, en daardie gek hooftooisel – en dan aan die standbeeld in die Raweklootoring met die klipdiadeem op haar wit marmerkrulle. . .

En toe Harry aan die einde van die gang kom, onthou hy skielik van 'n derde klipbeeld: die een van 'n lelike ou heksemeester op wie se kop hy 'n pruik en 'n gehawende ou tiara gesit het. Die skok skiet deur Harry met die hitte van Vuurwhisky en hy struikel amper.

Hy weet uiteindelik waar die Horcrux vir hom wag . . .

Tom Riddle, wat niemand in sy vertroue geneem het nie en altyd alleen gewerk het, was dalk arrogant genoeg om te glo hy, en net hy, het Hogwarts Kasteel se diepste geheime deurgrond. Dumbledore en Flitwick, synde modelstudente, het natuurlik nooit 'n voet in daardie spesifieke plek gesit nie, maar hy, Harry, het van die gebaande weë afgedwaal toe hy hier op skool was – hier is uiteindelik 'n geheim wat hy en Voldemort deel, een waarvan Dumbledore nooit geweet het nie –

Hy word wakker geskud deur professor Sprout wat verbystorm, gevolg deur Neville en 'n halfdosyn ander: hulle het almal oorskutte op en dra goed wat soos groot potplante lyk.

"Mandragoras!" bulder Neville in die hardloop oor sy skouer vir Harry. "Gaan dit oor die mure gooi – hulle sal nie hiervan hou nie!"

Harry weet nou waarheen om te gaan: hy maak haastig spore, met Hagrid en Tande agterna. Hulle nael verby portret na portret en die geskilderde figure hardloop saam met hulle, towenaars en hekse in plooikrae en outydse kniebroeke, in wapenrusting en mantels, en bondel saam op mekaar se skilderdoeke en gee skreeuend nuus uit ander dele van die kasteel. Toe hulle aan die einde van die gang

kom, skud die hele kasteel en toe 'n reusagtige vaas met 'n geweldige slag van sy voetstuk af geblaas word, weet Harry die plek is in die greep van betowerings meer onheilspellend as die onderwysers en die Orde s'n.

"Dis oukei, Tande – dis oukei!" skree Hagrid, maar die groot beerhond het op die vlug geslaan toe porseleinsplinters soos skrapnel deur die lug vlieg. Hagrid sit die verskrikte hond agterna en los Harry alleen.

Hy beur vorentoe deur die trillende gange, sy towerstaf gereed, en die klein geskilderde ridder, Sir Cadogan, volg hom op sy drawwende, vet ponie en met kletterende wapenrusting een hele gang se lengte langs, van skildery na skildery, en moedig hom luidkeels aan.

"Windlawaaie en skarminkels, brakke en skobbejakke, dryf hulle uit, Harry Potter, weg met hulle!"

Harry vlieg om 'n hoek en kom af op Fred en 'n klein groepie studente, asook Lee Jordan en Hannah Abbott. Hulle staan by nóg 'n leë voetstuk van 'n standbeeld wat 'n geheime gang verberg het. Hulle towerstawwe is gereed en hulle luister by die versteekte opening.

"Vannag dans die poppe!" roep Fred uit toe die kasteel weer skud, en Harry hardloop verder, net so verheug as angsbevange. Hy nael by nog 'n verdere gang af, en dan is daar oral uile, en Mevrou Norris sis en probeer met haar pote na hulle klap, ongetwyfeld om hulle terug te kry na waar hulle hoort . . .

"Potter!"

Aberforth Dumbledore blokkeer die gang voor hom, sy towerstaf gelig en gereed.

"Daar's honderde kinders wat deur my kroeg foeter, Potter!"

"Ek weet, ons ontruim," sê Harry, "Voldemort –"

"– val aan, want hulle't jou nog nie uitgelewer nie, ja," sê Aberforth. "Ek's nie doof nie, die hele Hogsmeade het hom gehoor. En nie een van julle het daaraan gedink om 'n paar Slytherins as gyselaars te hou nie? Dis Doodseters se kinders wat julle nou net na veiligheid weggestuur het. Sou dit nie 'n bietjie slimmer gewees het om hulle hier te hou nie?"

"Dit sou Voldemort nie gekeer het nie," sê Harry, "en jou broer sou dit nooit gedoen het nie."

Aberforth steun en storm in die teenoorgestelde rigting weg.

Jou broer sou dit nooit gedoen het nie . . . Wel, dit is die waarheid, dink Harry terwyl hy weer verder hardloop. Dumbledore, wat Snape so lank verdedig het, sou studente nooit as afdreigmiddel gebruik het nie . . .

En dan gly hy om die laaste hoek en met 'n gil van verligting gemeng met woede sien hy hulle: Ron en Hermione, albei met hulle arms vol groot, gebuigde, vuil geel voorwerpe, Ron met 'n besem onder sy arm.

"Waar de *hel* was julle?" roep Harry uit.

"Kamer van Geheimenisse," sê Ron.

"Kamer van – *wat*?" sê Harry en kom wankelend voor hulle tot stilstand.

"Dit was Ron, alles Ron se idee!" sê Hermione uitasem. "Was dit nie absoluut briljant nie? Daar staan ons, ná jy weg is, en ek sê vir Ron, selfs al kry ons die ander een, hoe gaan ons daarvan ontslae raak? Ons het nog nie van die beker ontslae geraak nie! En toe dink hy daaraan! Die Basilisk!"

"Wat de –?"

"Iets wat ons kan gebruik om van die Horcruxe ontslae te raak," sê Ron eenvoudig.

Harry se oë gaan af na die goed wat Ron en Hermione in hulle arms vashou: groot, gebuigde tande wat hy nou besef uit die dooie Basilisk se skedel geruk is.

"Maar hoe het julle daar ingekom?" vra hy terwyl hy van die tande na Ron staar. "'n Mens moet Parseltaal praat!"

"Hy het!" fluister Hermione. "Wys vir hom, Ron!"

Ron maak 'n afgryslike, wurgende sisgeluid.

"Dis wat jy gedoen het om die hangertjie oop te maak," sê hy apologeties vir Harry. "Ek moes 'n paar keer probeer om dit reg te kry, maar," hy haal sy skouers beskeie op, "ons kon dit op die ou end doen."

"Hy was *ongelooflik*," sê Hermione. "Ongelooflik!"

"So . . ." Harry sukkel om by te hou. "So . . ."

"So nog 'n Horcrux is in sy maai," sê Ron en haal die verminkte oorblyfsels van Hoesenenproes se beker onder sy baadjie uit. "Hermione het dit met 'n tand gesteek. Gedog sy behoort te. Sy't nog nie die plesier gehad nie."

"Geniaal!" juig Harry.

"Dit was niks," sê Ron, al lyk hy ingenome met homself. "So wat's nuus aan jou kant?"

Terwyl hy dit sê, is daar 'n ontploffing bokant hulle en al drie kyk op: stof val uit die plafon en hulle hoor 'n veraf gil.

"Ek weet hoe die diadeem lyk, en ek weet waar dit is," sê Harry, wat nou vinnig praat. "Hy het dit weggesteek presies waar ek my ou Towerdrankieboek gehou het, waar almal al eeue lank goed wegsteek. Hy't gedink hy's die enigste een wat daai plek ontdek het. Komaan."

Terwyl die mure weer tril, lei hy die ander twee terug deur die versteekte ingang en by die trap af na die Vertrek van Vereistes. Dit is leeg, met die uitsondering van drie vrouens: Ginny, Tonks en 'n bejaarde heks met 'n motgevrete hoed op haar kop, wat Harry dadelik as Neville se ouma herken.

"A, Potter," sê sy opgewek asof sy vir hom gewag het. "Jy kan vir ons sê wat aangaan."

"Is almal oukei?" vra Ginny en Tonks gelyk.

"Sover ons weet," sê Harry. "Is daar nog mense in die gang op pad Swynenes toe?"

Hy weet die Vertrek sal nie kan transformeer terwyl daar iemand in is nie.

"Ek was die laaste een wat deurgekom het," sê mevrou Longbottom. "Ek het dit verseël, ek dink dis onwys om dit oop te los noudat Aberforth weg is by die kroeg. Het julle my kleinseun gesien?"

"Hy's besig om te veg," sê Harry.

"Vanselfsprekend," sê die ou dame trots. "Verskoon my, ek moet hom gaan bystaan."

Sy draf verbasend vinnig na die kliptrap toe.

Harry kyk na Tonks.

"Ek dog jy's veronderstel om saam met Teddy by jou ma se huis te wees?"

"Ek kon dit nie vat om nie te weet nie –" Tonks lyk beangs. "Sy sal na hom kyk – het julle vir Remus gesien?"

"Hy was van plan om 'n groep vegters buite na die terrein toe te lei –"

Sonder 'n verdere woord maak Tonks haar haastig uit die voete.

"Ginny," sê Harry. "Ek's jammer, maar jy sal ook moet uitgaan. Net vir 'n rukkie. Dan kan jy weer inkom."

Ginny lyk absoluut verheug om haar skuilplek te verlaat.

"En dan kan jy weer inkom!" herhaal hy terwyl sy agter Tonks aan by die trap ophardloop. *"Jy moet weer terug hiernatoe kom!"*

"Wag 'n bietjie!" sê Ron skerp. "Ons het van iemand vergeet!"

"Wie?" vra Hermione.

"Die huiselwe, hulle sal almal onder in die kombuis wees, dan nie?"

"Jy bedoel ons moet hulle laat baklei?" vra Harry.

"Nee," sê Ron ernstig. "Ek bedoel ons moet vir hulle sê om hier weg te kom. Ons wil nie nog Dobbys hê nie, of hoe? Ons kan hulle nie beveel om vir ons te sterf nie –"

Daar is 'n gekletter toe die Basilisktande uit Hermione se arms

val. Sy hardloop na Ron toe, gooi haar arms om sy nek en soen hom vol op die mond. Ron gooi die tande en besemstok wat hy vashou neer en reageer met soveel entoesiasme dat hy Hermione van haar voete af oplig.

"Moet julle nou?" vra Harry flouerig, en toe daar niks gebeur nie, behalwe dat Ron en Hermione mekaar nog stywer vashou en op een plek heen en weer wieg, verhef hy sy stem: "HEI! Hier's 'n oorlog aan die gang!"

Ron en Hermione tree effens terug, hulle arms steeds om mekaar.

"Ek weet, pel," sê Ron, wat lyk of hy so pas met 'n Moker teen die agterkop geslaan is, "so dis nou of nooit nie, nè?"

"Vergeet daarvan, wat van die Horcrux?" roep Harry uit. "Kan julle twee julle dalk net – dalk net inhou tot ons die diadeem gekry het?"

"Ja – reg – 'skuus –" sê Ron, en hy en Hermione begin die tande optel, al twee pienk in die gesig.

Toe hulle drie terug by die boonste gang ingaan, is dit duidelik dat die situasie in die kasteel ernstig versleg het gedurende die paar minute dat hulle in die Vertrek van Vereistes was. Die mure en plafon skud erger as ooit; die lug is vol stof en deur die naaste venster sien Harry groen en rooi ligstrale so naby aan die voet van die kasteel dat hy weet die Doodseters gaan binnekort by die plek inbars. Harry kyk af en sien Ghrop die reus verbydwaal: hy swaai iets rond wat lyk soos 'n klipdraakkop wat van die dak afgeruk is en brul van misnoeë.

"Kom ons hoop hy trap op 'n paar van hulle!" sê Ron terwyl nog gille van naby af weerklink.

"Solank dit nie van ons mense is nie!" sê 'n stem. Harry draai om en sien vir Ginny en Tonks, albei met hulle towerstawwe gereed by die naaste venster waar daar nou verskeie ruite weg is. Terwyl hy kyk, vuur Ginny 'n goed gemikte paljas af op 'n groep vegters onder.

"Mooi so, meisie!" brul 'n figuur wat deur die stof na hulle toe hardloop, en Harry sien weer vir Aberforth, wie se grys hare wapper terwyl hy 'n klein klompie studente verbylei. "Dit lyk of hulle deur die Noordelike Kantele breek. Hulle't hulle eie reuse saamgebring!"

"Het jy vir Remus gesien?" roep Tonks agter hom aan.

"Hy was in 'n tweegeveg met Dolohof," skree Aberforth, "daarna het ek hom nie weer gesien nie!"

"Tonks," sê Ginny. "Tonks, ek is seker hy's oukei –"

Maar Tonks het al klaar agter Aberforth aan in die stof in gehardloop.

Ginny draai hulpeloos na Harry, Ron en Hermione.

"Hulle sal oukei wees," sê Harry, al weet hy dit is leë woorde. "Ginny, ons is nou-nou terug, bly net uit die pad uit, bly net veilig – komaan!" sê hy vir Ron en Hermione, en hulle hardloop terug na die stuk van die muur waaragter die Vertrek van Vereistes wag om die volgende een wat inkom se bevele uit te voer.

Ek soek die plek waar alles weggesteek word, vra Harry die Vertrek in sy kop, en die deur verskyn toe hulle die derde keer verbyhardloop.

Die chaos van die geveg verdoof die oomblik dat hulle die drumpel oorsteek en die deur agter hulle toemaak: alles is stil. Hulle is in 'n plek so groot soos 'n katedraal; dit lyk soos 'n stad met toringhoë mure gebou van voorwerpe wat duisende studente in vervloë dae hier weggesteek het.

"En hy't nooit besef *enigiemand* kan inkom nie?" vra Ron in 'n stem wat in die stilte weerklink.

"Hy't gedink hy's die enigste een," sê Harry. "Ongelukkig vir hom moes ek op my dag ook goed hier wegsteek . . . Hierlangs," voeg hy by, "ek dink dis hier af . . ."

Hy loop verby die opgestopte trol en die Verdwynkabinet wat Draco Malfoy verlede jaar met sulke rampspoedige gevolge reggemaak het, huiwer dan, kyk op en af met die rye rommel; hy kan nie onthou waarheen om volgende te gaan nie . . .

"Accio diadeem," roep Hermione desperaat uit, maar niks vlieg deur die lug na hulle toe nie. Dit lyk asof hierdie vertrek, soos die kluis in Gringotts, sy versteekte voorwerpe nie so maklik gaan oorhandig nie.

"Kom ons gaan uitmekaar," sê Harry vir die ander twee. "Soek 'n klipborsbeeld van 'n ou man wat 'n pruik en 'n tiara dra! Dit staan op 'n hangkas en dis definitief hier naby iewers . . ."

Hulle beweeg haastig in aangrensende paadjies op. Harry hoor die ander twee se voetstappe weerklink deur die toringhoë stapels gemors, bottels, hoedens, kratte, stoele, boeke, wapens, besemstokke, kolwe . . .

"Iewers hier naby," prewel Harry by homself. "Iewers . . . iewers . . ."

Hy gaan dieper en dieper by die doolhof in, op soek na voorwerpe wat hy van sy vorige besoek onthou. Sy asem is hard in sy ore en toe voel dit of sy siel sidder: daar is dit, reg voor hom, die ou hangkas met blase in die vernis, die kas waarin hy sy ou Towerdrankieboek weggesteek het, en bo-op dit, die kliptowenaar met pokmerke wat 'n stowwerige ou pruik ophet, en iets wat lyk soos 'n antieke, verkleurde tiara.

Hy het sy hand reeds uitgesteek, al is hy nog 'n entjie weg, toe 'n stem agter hom sê: "Wag, Potter."

Hy kom glyend tot stilstand en draai om. Crabbe en Goyle staan agter hom, skouer aan skouer, met hulle towerstawwe op Harry gerig. Deur die klein opening tussen hulle smalende gesigte sien hy vir Draco Malfoy.

"Dis my towerstaf wat jy daar het, Potter," sê Malfoy en wys daarna deur die gaping tussen Crabbe en Goyle.

"Nie meer nie," hyg Harry en vat die meidoringtowerstaf stywer vas. "Wengoed is hougoed, Malfoy. Wie s'n leen jy?"

"My ma s'n," sê Draco.

Harry lag, al is niks juis snaaks aan die situasie nie. Hy kan Ron en Hermione nie meer hoor nie. Hulle moet buite hoorafstand beweeg het op soek na die diadeem.

"So hoekom is julle drie nie by Voldemort nie?" vra Harry.

"Ons gaan 'n beloning kry," sê Crabbe. Sy stem is verbasend sag vir so 'n enorme persoon; Harry het hom amper nooit vantevore hoor praat nie. Crabbe glimlag soos 'n seuntjie wat 'n groot sak lekkers belowe is. "Ons het hier rondgehang, Potter. Besluit om nie te waai nie. Besluit om jou na hom toe te vat."

"Goeie plan," sê Harry kastig bewonderend. Hy kan dit nie glo nie: hy is so naby, en nou dwarsboom Malfoy, Crabbe en Goyle hom. Hy begin stadig retireer na die plek waar die Horcrux skeef op die borsbeeld sit. As hy sy hande net daarop kan kry voor die geveg losbars . . .

"So hoe't julle hier ingekom?" vra hy om hulle aandag te probeer aflei.

"Ek het laas jaar omtrent heeltyd in die Vertrek van Versteekte Goed gebly," sê Malfoy, en sy stem is swakker as gewoonlik. "Ek weet hoe om in te kom."

"Ons het buite in die gang weggekruip," sê Goyle grommend. "Ons kan nou Ontgôg'lingspreuke doen! En toe," sy gesig vertrek in 'n idiotiese grynslag, "slaan jy daar reg voor ons uit en sê jy soek 'n dia-ding! Wat's 'n dia-ding?"

"Harry?" Ron se stem eggo skielik, van die ander kant van die muur regs van Harry af. "Praat jy met iemand?"

Met 'n sweepslagbeweging rig Crabbe sy towerstaf op die vyftig voet hoë berg van ou meubels, stukkende trommels, ou boeke en klede en onidentifiseerbare rommel en skree: "*Descendo!*"

Die muur begin wankel en stort dan ineen op die paadjie langsaan waar Ron staan.

"Ron!" bulder Harry terwyl Hermione iewers uit die oog gil, en

Harry hoor hoe stort ontelbare voorwerpe neer op die vloer aan die ander kant van die wankelende muur: hy wys met sy towerstaf daarna, skree: "*Finite!*" en dit kom tot bedaring.

"Nee!"" skree Malfoy en gryp Crabbe se arm toe hy gereed maak om sy towerspreuk te herhaal. "As jy die vertrek verwoes, begrawe jy dalk daardie diadeem-ding!"

"Wat maak dit saak?" sê Crabbe en ruk los. "Die Donker Heer wil vir Potter hê, wie traak oor 'n dia-ding?"

"Potter het dit hier kom soek," sê Malfoy wat sy ongeduld met sy onnosel makkers beswaarlik kan wegsteek, "so dit moet beteken –"

"'Moet beteken'?" Crabbe draai met onverbloemde heftigheid na Malfoy. "Wie gee om wat jy dink? Ek vat nie meer bevele van jou nie, Draco. Dis klaarpraat met jou en jou pa."

"Harry?" roep Ron weer van die ander kant van die rommelmuur. "Wat gaan aan?"

"Harry?" koggel Crabbe. "Wat gaan aan – *nee*, Potter! *Crucio!*"

Harry het na die tiara uitgereik; Crabbe se vloek mis hom, maar tref die klipborsbeeld wat in die lug op vlieg; die diadeem sweef boontoe en val dan en verdwyn tussen die massa voorwerpe waarop die borsbeeld gerus het.

"STOP!" skree Malfoy vir Crabbe en sy stem eggo deur die enorme vertrek. "Die Donker Heer wil hom lewend hê –"

"So? Ek maak hom mos nie dood nie?" sê Crabbe en ruk los uit Malfoy se greep, "maar as ek kan, sal ek, want die Donker Heer wil hom tog in elk geval dood hê, so wat's die versk–?"

'n Straal vuurrooi lig skiet rakelings verby Harry: Hermione het om die hoek agter hom gehardloop en 'n Bedwelmspreuk op Crabbe se kop afgestuur. Dit is net mis omdat Malfoy hom betyds uit die pad pluk.

"Dis daai Modderbloed! *Avada Kedavra!*"

Harry sien hoe Hermione wegduik en sy woede dat Crabbe gemik het om dood te maak, wis alle ander dinge uit sy kop. Hy vuur 'n Bedwelmspreuk af op Crabbe, wat uit die pad spring en Malfoy se towerstaf uit sy hand stamp; dit rol weg onder 'n berg gebreekte meubels en bokse in.

"Moenie hom doodmaak nie! MOENIE HOM DOODMAAK NIE!" skree Malfoy vir Crabbe en Goyle wat albei na Harry mik. Hulle huiwer vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde en dit is al wat Harry nodig het.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Goyle se towerstaf vlieg uit sy hand en verdwyn in die hoop voorwerpe langs hom; Goyle spring verspot op een plek rond om

dit te probeer terugkry; Malfoy koes vir Hermione se tweede Bedwelmspreuk en Ron, wat skielik aan die einde van die paadjie verskyn, vuur 'n Vasbindvloek af op Crabbe, wat hom naelskraap mis.

Crabbe swaai om en skree weer: "*Avada Kedavra!*" Ron duik weg om die groen ligstraal te ontwyk. Malfoy kruip verskrik agter 'n driebeenhangkas weg terwyl Hermione op hom afstorm en Goyle in die hardloop met 'n Bedwelmspreuk tref.

"Dis hier iewers!" skree Harry vir haar en beduie na die hoop rommel waarin die tiara geval het. "Soek daarna terwyl ek Ron gaan hel–"

"HARRY!" skree sy.

'n Brullende, golwende geluid agter hom gee hom 'n oomblik se waarskuwing. Hy draai om en sien hoe sowel Ron as Crabbe op hulle vinnigste met die paadjie langs op hulle afstorm.

"Smaak jy dit warm, gespuis?" brul Crabbe in die hardloop.

Maar dit lyk of hy nie beheer het oor wat hy gedoen het nie. Abnormale groot vlamme agtervolg hulle en lek teen die kante van die rommelmure wat by hulle aanraking tot roet verkrummel.

"*Aguamenti!*" skree Harry, maar die straal water wat voor by sy towerstaf uitkom, verdamp in die lug.

"HARDLOOP!"

Malfoy gryp die Bedwelmde Goyle en sleep hom saam; Crabbe lyk nou doodsbang en hardloop onder hulle almal uit; Harry, Ron en Hermione laat spaander agter hom aan, en die vuur agtervolg hulle. Dit is nie 'n normale vuur nie; Crabbe het 'n vloek gebruik wat Harry nie ken nie. Hulle kom om 'n hoek en die vlamme jaag hulle asof dit lewend is en gevoelens het en daarop uit is om hulle dood te maak. Nou muteer die vuur en vorm 'n reusetrop vlammende monsters: gloeiende slange, drogbeelde en drake verrys en val en verrys weer, en die eeue se puin wat hulle verslind, word met hulle pote hoog in die lug opgegooi en dan in hulle getande bekke deur die vlammesee verteer.

Malfoy, Crabbe en Goyle het verdwyn: Harry, Ron en Hermione steek in hulle spore vas; die vuurmonsters omsingel hulle en kom al nader en nader, met kloue en horings en sterte wat slaan, en die hitte is 'n soliede muur om hulle.

"Wat kan ons doen?" skree Hermione bo-oor die vuur se oorverdowende gebrul. "Wat kan ons doen?"

"Hier!"

Harry gryp twee swaar besemstokke uit die naaste hoop rommel en gooi een vir Ron, wat Hermione agter hom daarop trek. Harry swaai sy been oor die tweede besem en met harde skoppe teen die

vloer styg hulle in die lug op en ontwyk net-net 'n vlammende roofvoël wat met sy bek na hulle hap. Die rook en hitte word oorweldigend: onder hulle verteer die vloekvuur geslagte desperate studente onder verdenking se smokkelware, die skuldige resultate van 'n duisend verbanne eksperimente, die geheime van tallose siele wat in hierdie vertrek toevlug kom soek het. Harry sien nêrens 'n spoor van Malfoy, Crabbe of Goyle nie: hy vlieg so laag as wat hy dit durf waag oor die plunderende vlammemonsters om hulle te probeer vind, maar daar is niks behalwe vuur nie: wat 'n aaklige manier om dood te gaan . . . Hy wou dit nooit so gehad het nie . . .

"Harry, ons moet hier uit, ons moet hier uitkom!" bulder Ron, al is dit onmoontlik om deur die swart rook te sien waar die deur is.

En dan hoor Harry 'n yl, jammerlike, menslike kreet te midde van die gruwelike geraas, die dreuning van verterende vlamme.

"Dis – te – gevaarlik –!" gil Ron, maar Harry draai in die lug om. Sy bril beskerm sy oë effens teen die rook, hulle fynkam die vuurstorm onder, soek 'n teken van lewe, 'n ledemaat of 'n gesig wat nog nie verkool is nie . . .

En dan sien hy hulle: Malfoy met sy arms om die bewustelose Goyle, albei op 'n wankelende toring van verkoolde lessenaars, en Harry duik af. Malfoy sien hom kom en lig een arm, maar selfs toe Harry dit gryp, weet hy onmiddellik dit sal nie help nie: Goyle is te swaar en Malfoy se hand is so natgesweet dat dit dadelik uit Harry s'n gly –

"AS ONS OOR HULLE DOODGAAN, MAAK EK JOU VREK, HARRY!" brul Ron se stem en terwyl 'n groot, vlammende drogmonster op hulle toesak, trek hy en Hermione Goyle tot op hulle besem en styg weer rollende en tollende die lug in terwyl Malfoy steierend agter Harry opklim.

"Die deur, mik vir die deur, die deur!" skree Malfoy in Harry se oor; Harry versnel en volg Ron, Hermione en Goyle deur die swart rookwolk, skaars in staat om asem te haal. En oral om hulle word die laaste paar voorwerpe wat nog nie deur die verterende vlamme verorber is nie in die lug op geslinger soos die vuurvloek se monsters hulle uitgelate hoog opgooi: bekers en skilde, 'n skitterende halssnoer en 'n ou, verkleurde tiara –

"Wat doen jy, wat doen jy? Die deur is daai kant toe!" skreeu Malfoy, maar Harry maak 'n haarnaalddraai en duik af. Dit is asof die diadeem in vertraagde tempo val, draai en glinster terwyl dit aftuimel na 'n slang se gapende bek, en dan kry hy dit beet, vang dit om sy gewrig –

Harry swenk weer toe die slang na hom mik, dan skiet hy boon-

toe en reguit na die plek waar hy bid die deur oopstaan: Ron, Hermione en Goyle het verdwyn, Malfoy klou so styf aan Harry vas dat dit seermaak. Dan, deur die rook, sien Harry 'n reghoekige strook teen die muur en stuur die besem soontoe, en oomblikke later vul skoon lug sy longe en hulle vlieg in die gangmuur onder hulle vas.

Malfoy val van die besem af en lê plat op sy gesig, hygend, hoesend en brakend. Harry rol om en sit regop: die deur na die Vertrek van Vereistes het verdwyn en Ron en Hermione sit uitasem op die vloer langs Goyle, wat steeds bewusteloos is.

"C – Crabbe," sê Malfoy stikkend sodra hy weer kan praat. "C – Crabbe . . ."

"Hy's dood," sê Ron bars.

Daar is 'n stilte, afgesien van 'n gehyg en gehoes. Dan skud 'n paar hewige ontploffings die kasteel en 'n groot kavalkade deurskynende figure galop verby op perde; hulle koppe skree bloeddorstig onder hulle arms. Harry steier op die been toe die Koplose Kavallerie verby is en kyk rond: die geveg duur nog oral om hom voort. Hy hoor meer krete as die verdwynende spoke s'n. Paniek ontbrand in hom.

"Waar's Ginny?" vra hy skerp. "Sy was hier. Sy was veronderstel om weer na die Vertrek van Vereistes terug te gaan."

"Demmit, dink jy dit sal ná daardie brand nog werk?" vra Ron, maar hy staan ook op, vryf sy borskas en kyk links en regs. "Sal ons uitmekaar gaan en soek –?"

"Nee," sê Hermione, wat ook opstaan. Malfoy en Goyle lê in hopelose hopies op die gang se vloer; nie een van hulle het 'n towerstaf nie. "Kom ons bly bymekaar. Ek stel voor ons gaan – Harry, wat's daai aan jou arm?"

"Wat? O ja –"

Hy haal die diadeem van sy gewrig af en hou dit op. Dit is nog warm en swart van roet, maar toe hy dit van naby bekyk, kan hy die woordjies wat daarop geëts is, net-net uitmaak: *Onuitputlike wysheid is 'n onuitputlike skat.*

Iets bloederigs, donker en teeragtig, lek uit die diadem. Skielik voel Harry die ding geweldig vibreer, dan breek dit in sy hande oop en terwyl dit gebeur, verbeel hy hom hy hoor 'n vae, veraf gil van pyn wat nie van die terrein buite of die kasteel af kom nie, maar uit die ding wat nou net in sy vingers versplinter het.

"Dit moet 'n Vyandvuur gewees het!" prewel Hermione, haar oë vasgenael op die gebreekte stukkies.

"Ekskuus?"

"'n Vyandvuur – 'n vuurvloek – dis een van die goed wat

Horcruxe vernietig, maar ek sou nooit, ooit gewaag het om dit te gebruik nie, dis te gevaarlik. Hoe't Crabbe geweet hoe om –?"

"Hy moes dit by die Carrows geleer het," sê Harry grimmig.

"Dis jammer hy't nie gekonsentreer toe hulle gesê het hoe om dit te stop nie," sê Ron, wie se hare net soos Hermione s'n geskroei is en wat 'n swart gesig het. "As hy ons almal nie probeer afmaai het nie, sou ek nogal jammer gewees het hy's dood."

"Maar besef julle nie?" fluister Hermione. "Dit beteken as ons net by die slang kan uitkom –"

Maar sy sluk haar woorde toe uitroepe en die onmiskenbare geluide van tweegevegte die gang vul. Harry kyk om en dit voel of sy hart gaan staan: Doodseters het Hogwarts binnegedring. Fred en Percy retireer na Harry-hulle toe terwyl albei besig is om teen gemaskerde mans met mantelkappe op te veg.

Harry, Ron en Hermione hardloop vorentoe om te help: ligstrale flits in alle rigtings en die man wat teen Percy baklei, blaas vinnig die aftog: dan glip sy kap af en hulle sien 'n hoë voorkop en gestreepte hare –

"Hallo, Minister!" brul Percy en stuur 'n netjiese paljas reguit op Thicknesse af. Die man laat val sy towerstaf en gryp na die voorkant van sy kleed, skynbaar in geweldige ongemak. "Het ek dit al genoem dat ek bedank?"

"Jy maak grappies, Perce!" roep Fred uit terwyl die Doodseter teen wie hy veg onder die gewig van drie afsonderlike Bedwelmspreuke inmekaar sak. Thicknesse het op die grond neergeval met klein pennetjies wat oral op hom uitkom; dit lyk of hy besig is om in 'n soort seekastaiing te verander. Fred kyk verheug na Percy.

"Jy maak *sowaar* grappies, Perce . . . Ek dink nie ek het jou hoor grappies maak sedert jy –"

Die lug ontplof. Hulle was saam gegroepeer: Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred en Percy, die twee Doodseters aan hulle voete, een Bedwelm, die ander een ge-Transfigureer, en in daardie fraksie van 'n sekonde, terwyl dit voel of die gevaar tydelik in bedwang is, word die wêreld uitmekaar geruk. Harry voel hoe hy deur die lug vlieg en al wat hy kan doen, is om so styf moontlik vas te hou aan daardie dun stukkie hout wat sy enigste wapen is en sy kop met sy arms te beskerm: hy hoor sy makkers se krete sonder om te weet wat met hulle gebeur het –

En dan verander die wêreld in pyn en halfdonkerte: hy is halfpad begrawe onder die puin van 'n gang wat swaar getref is: koue lug sê vir hom die kant van die kasteel is weggeblaas en iets warms en taais op sy wang sê vir hom hy bloei erg. Dan hoor hy 'n aaklige

gil wat aan sy ingewande ruk, wat spreek van 'n ondraaglike pyn wat nóg vlamme nóg vloeke kan veroorsaak, en hy staan steierend op, banger as wat hy nog die hele dag was, miskien banger as wat hy nog ooit in sy lewe was . . .

En Hermione kom sukkelend orent in die puinhoop en drie rooikopmans is bymekaar op die grond waar die muur uitmekaar geruk is. Harry gryp Hermione se hand terwyl hulle oor klippe en hout nader steier en strompel.

"Nee – nee – nee!" skree iemand. "Nee! Fred! Nee!"

En Percy skud sy broer, en Ron kniel langs hulle, en Fred se oë staar onsiende, die skynsel van sy laaste lag nog steeds op sy gesig geëts.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



THE ELDER WAND

The world had ended, so why had the battle not ceased, the castle fallen silent in horror, and every combatant laid down their arms? Harry's mind was in free fall, spinning out of control, unable to grasp the impossibility, because Fred Weasley could not be dead, the evidence of all his senses must be lying —

And then a body fell past the hole blown into the side of the school, and curses flew in at them from the darkness, hitting the wall behind their heads.

"Get down!" Harry shouted, as more curses flew through the night: He and Ron had both grabbed Hermione and pulled her to the floor, but Percy lay across Fred's body, shielding it from further harm, and when Harry shouted, "Percy, come on, we've got to move!" he shook

his head.

"Percy!" Harry saw tear tracks streaking the grime coating Ron's face as he seized his elder brother's shoulders and pulled, but Percy would not budge. "Percy, you can't do anything for him! We're going to —"

Hermione screamed, and Harry, turning, did not need to ask why. A monstrous spider the size of a small car was trying to climb through the huge hole in the wall: One of Aragog's descendants had joined the fight.

Ron and Harry shouted together; their spells collided and the monster was blown backward, its legs jerking horribly, and vanished into the darkness.

"It brought friends!" Harry called to the others, glancing over the edge of the castle through the hole in the wall the curses had blasted: More giant spiders were climbing the side of the building, liberated from the Forbidden Forest, into which the Death Eaters must have penetrated. Harry fired Stunning Spells down upon them, knocking the lead monster into its fellows, so that they rolled back down the building and out of sight. Then more curses came soaring over Harry's head, so close he felt the force of them blow his hair.

"Let's move, NOW!"

Pushing Hermione ahead of him with Ron, Harry stooped to seize Fred's body under the armpits. Percy, realizing what Harry was trying to do, stopped clinging to the body and helped; together, crouching low to avoid the curses flying at them from the grounds, they hauled Fred out of the way.

"Here," said Harry, and they placed him in a niche where a suit of

armor had stood earlier. He could not bear to look at Fred a second longer than he had to, and after making sure that the body was well hidden, he took off after Ron and Hermione. Malfoy and Goyle had vanished, but at the end of the corridor, which was now full of dust and falling masonry, glass long gone from the windows, he saw many people running backward and forward, whether friends or foes he could not tell. Rounding the corner, Percy let out a bull-like roar: "ROOKWOOD!" and sprinted off in the direction of a tall man, who was pursuing a couple of students.

"Harry, in here!" Hermione screamed.

She had pulled Ron behind a tapestry: They seemed to be wrestling together, and for one mad second Harry thought that they were embracing again; then he saw that Hermione was trying to restrain Ron, to stop him running after Percy.

"Listen to me — *LISTEN, RON!*"

"I wanna help — I wanna kill Death Eaters —"

His face was contorted, smeared with dust and smoke, and he was shaking with rage and grief.

"Ron, we're the only ones who can end it! Please — Ron — we need the snake, we've got to kill the snake!" said Hermione.

But Harry knew how Ron felt: Pursuing another Horcrux could not bring the satisfaction of revenge; he too wanted to fight, to punish them, the people who had killed Fred, and he wanted to find the other Weasleys, and above all make sure, make quite sure, that Ginny was not — but he could not permit that idea to form in his mind —

"We *will* fight!" Hermione said. "We'll have to, to reach the snake! But let's not lose sight now of what we're supposed to be d-doing!

We're the only ones who can end it!"

She was crying too, and she wiped her face on her torn and singed sleeve as she spoke, but she took great heaving breaths to calm herself as, still keeping a tight hold on Ron, she turned to Harry.

"You need to find out where Voldemort is, because he'll have the snake with him, won't he? Do it, Harry — look inside him!"

Why was it so easy? Because his scar had been burning for hours, yearning to show him Voldemort's thoughts? He closed his eyes on her command, and at once, the screams and the bangs and all the discordant sounds of the battle were drowned until they became distant, as though he stood far, far away from them. . . .

He was standing in the middle of a desolate but strangely familiar room, with peeling paper on the walls and all the windows boarded except for one. The sounds of the assault on the castle were muffled and distant. The single unblocked window revealed distant bursts of light where the castle stood, but inside the room it was dark except for a solitary oil lamp.

He was rolling his wand between his fingers, watching it, his thoughts on the room in the castle, the secret room only he had ever found, the room, like the Chamber, that you had to be clever and cunning and inquisitive to discover. . . . He was confident that the boy would not find the diadem . . . although Dumbledore's puppet had come much farther than he had ever expected . . . too far. . . .

"My Lord," said a voice, desperate and cracked. He turned: There was Lucius Malfoy sitting in the darkest corner, ragged and still bearing the marks of the punishment he had received after the boy's last escape. One of his eyes remained closed and puffy. "My Lord . . .

please . . . my son . . .”

“If your son is dead, Lucius, it is not my fault. He did not come and join me, like the rest of the Slytherins. Perhaps he has decided to befriend Harry Potter?”

“No — never,” whispered Malfoy.

“You must hope not.”

“Aren’t — aren’t you afraid, my Lord, that Potter might die at another hand but yours?” asked Malfoy, his voice shaking. “Wouldn’t it be . . . forgive me . . . more prudent to call off this battle, enter the castle, and seek him y-yourself?”

“Do not pretend, Lucius. You wish the battle to cease so that you can discover what has happened to your son. And I do not need to seek Potter. Before the night is out, Potter will have come to find me.”

Voldemort dropped his gaze once more to the wand in his fingers. It troubled him . . . and those things that troubled Lord Voldemort needed to be rearranged. . . .

“Go and fetch Snape.”

“Snape, m-my Lord?”

“Snape. Now. I need him. There is a — service — I require from him. Go.”

Frightened, stumbling a little through the gloom, Lucius left the room. Voldemort continued to stand there, twirling the wand between his fingers, staring at it.

“It is the only way, Nagini,” he whispered, and he looked around, and there was the great thick snake, now suspended in midair, twisting gracefully within the enchanted, protected space he had

made for her, a starry, transparent sphere somewhere between glittering cage and tank.

With a gasp, Harry pulled back and opened his eyes; at the same moment his ears were assaulted with the screeches and cries, the smashes and bangs of battle.

"He's in the Shrieking Shack. The snake's with him, it's got some sort of magical protection around it. He's just sent Lucius Malfoy to find Snape."

"Voldemort's sitting in the Shrieking Shack?" said Hermione, outraged. "He's not — he's not even *fighting*?"

"He doesn't think he needs to fight," said Harry. "He thinks I'm going to go to him."

"But why?"

"He knows I'm after Horcruxes — he's keeping Nagini close beside him — obviously I'm going to have to go to him to get near the thing —"

"Right," said Ron, squaring his shoulders. "So you can't go, that's what he wants, what he's expecting. You stay here and look after Hermione, and I'll go and get it —"

Harry cut across Ron.

"You two stay here, I'll go under the Cloak and I'll be back as soon as I —"

"No," said Hermione, "it makes much more sense if I take the Cloak and —"

"Don't even think about it," Ron snarled at her.

Before Hermione could get farther than "Ron, I'm just as capable —" the tapestry at the top of the staircase on which they stood was

ripped open.

"POTTER!"

Two masked Death Eaters stood there, but even before their wands were fully raised, Hermione shouted, *"Glisseo!"*

The stairs beneath their feet flattened into a chute and she, Harry, and Ron hurtled down it, unable to control their speed but so fast that the Death Eaters' Stunning Spells flew far over their heads. They shot through the concealing tapestry at the bottom and spun onto the floor, hitting the opposite wall.

"Duro!" cried Hermione, pointing her wand at the tapestry, and there were two loud, sickening crunches as the tapestry turned to stone and the Death Eaters pursuing them crumpled against it.

"Get back!" shouted Ron, and he, Harry, and Hermione flattened themselves against a door as a herd of galloping desks thundered past, shepherded by a sprinting Professor McGonagall. She appeared not to notice them: Her hair had come down and there was a gash on her cheek. As she turned the corner, they heard her scream, "CHARGE!"

"Harry, you get the Cloak on," said Hermione. "Never mind us —"

But he threw it over all three of them; large though they were, he doubted anyone would see their disembodied feet through the dust that clogged the air, the falling stone, the shimmer of spells.

They ran down the next staircase and found themselves in a corridor full of duelers. The portraits on either side of the fighters were crammed with figures screaming advice and encouragement, while Death Eaters, both masked and unmasked, dueled students and teachers. Dean had won himself a wand, for he was face-to-face with

Dolohov, Parvati with Travers. Harry, Ron, and Hermione raised their wands at once, ready to strike, but the duelers were weaving and darting around so much that there was a strong likelihood of hurting one of their own side if they cast curses. Even as they stood braced, looking for the opportunity to act, there came a great *"Wheeeeeeeeeeee!"* and, looking up, Harry saw Peeves zooming over them, dropping Snargaluff pods down onto the Death Eaters, whose heads were suddenly engulfed in wriggling green tubers like fat worms.

"Argh!"

A fistful of tubers had hit the Cloak over Ron's head; the slimy green roots were suspended improbably in midair as Ron tried to shake them loose.

"Someone's invisible there!" shouted a masked Death Eater, pointing.

Dean made the most of the Death Eater's momentary distraction, knocking him out with a Stunning Spell; Dolohov attempted to retaliate and Parvati shot a Body-Bind Curse at him.

"LET'S GO!" Harry yelled, and he, Ron, and Hermione gathered the Cloak tightly around themselves and pelted, heads down, through the midst of the fighters, slipping a little in pools of Snargaluff juice, toward the top of the marble staircase into the entrance hall.

"I'm Draco Malfoy, I'm Draco, I'm on your side!"

Draco was on the upper landing, pleading with another masked Death Eater. Harry Stunned the Death Eater as they passed: Malfoy looked around, beaming, for his savior, and Ron punched him from under the Cloak. Malfoy fell backward on top of the Death Eater, his

mouth bleeding, utterly bemused.

"And that's the second time we've saved your life tonight, you two-faced bastard!" Ron yelled.

There were more duelers all over the stairs and in the hall, Death Eaters everywhere Harry looked: Yaxley, close to the front doors, in combat with Flitwick, a masked Death Eater dueling Kingsley right beside them. Students ran in every direction, some carrying or dragging injured friends. Harry directed a Stunning Spell toward the masked Death Eater; it missed but nearly hit Neville, who had emerged from nowhere brandishing armfuls of Venomous Tentacula, which looped itself happily around the nearest Death Eater and began reeling him in.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sped down the marble staircase: Glass shattered to their left, and the Slytherin hourglass that had recorded House points spilled its emeralds everywhere, so that people slipped and staggered as they ran. Two bodies fell from the balcony overhead as they reached the ground, and a gray blur that Harry took for an animal sped four-legged across the hall to sink its teeth into one of the fallen.

"NO!" shrieked Hermione, and with a deafening blast from her wand, Fenrir Greyback was thrown backward from the feebly stirring body of Lavender Brown. He hit the marble banisters and struggled to return to his feet. Then, with a bright white flash and a crack, a crystal ball fell on top of his head, and he crumpled to the ground and did not move.

"I have more!" shrieked Professor Trelawney from over the banisters. "More for any who want them! Here —"

And with a movement like a tennis serve, she heaved another enormous crystal sphere from her bag, waved her wand through the air, and caused the ball to speed across the hall and smash through a window. At the same moment, the heavy wooden front doors burst open, and more of the gigantic spiders forced their way into the entrance hall.

Screams of terror rent the air: The fighters scattered, Death Eaters and Hogwartians alike, and red and green jets of light flew into the midst of the oncoming monsters, which shuddered and reared, more terrifying than ever.

"How do we get out?" yelled Ron over all the screaming, but before either Harry or Hermione could answer they were bowled aside: Hagrid had come thundering down the stairs, brandishing his flowery pink umbrella.

"Don't hurt 'em, don't hurt 'em!" he yelled.

"HAGRID, NO!"

Harry forgot everything else: He sprinted out from under the Cloak, running bent double to avoid the curses illuminating the whole hall.

"HAGRID, COME BACK!"

But he was not even halfway to Hagrid when he saw it happen: Hagrid vanished amongst the spiders, and with a great scurrying, a foul swarming movement, they retreated under the onslaught of spells, Hagrid buried in their midst.

"HAGRID!"

Harry heard someone calling his own name, whether friend or foe he did not care: He was sprinting down the front steps into the dark

grounds, and the spiders were swarming away with their prey, and he could see nothing of Hagrid at all.

"HAGRID!"

He thought he could make out an enormous arm waving from the midst of the spider swarm, but as he made to chase after them, his way was impeded by a monumental foot, which swung down out of the darkness and made the ground on which he stood shudder. He looked up: A giant stood before him, twenty feet high, its head hidden in shadow, nothing but its treelike, hairy shins illuminated by light from the castle doors. With one brutal, fluid movement, it smashed a massive fist through an upper window, and glass rained down upon Harry, forcing him back under the shelter of the doorway.

"Oh my — !" shrieked Hermione, as she and Ron caught up with Harry and gazed upward at the giant now trying to seize people through the window above.

"DON'T!" Ron yelled, grabbing Hermione's hand as she raised her wand. "Stun him and he'll crush half the castle —"

"HAGGER?"

Grawp came lurching around the corner of the castle; only now did Harry realize that Grawp was, indeed, an undersized giant. The gargantuan monster trying to crush people on the upper floors looked around and let out a roar. The stone steps trembled as he stomped toward his smaller kin, and Grawp's lopsided mouth fell open, showing yellow, half-brick-sized teeth; and then they launched themselves at each other with the savagery of lions.

"RUN!" Harry roared; the night was full of hideous yells and blows as the giants wrestled, and he seized Hermione's hand and tore

down the steps into the grounds, Ron bringing up the rear. Harry had not lost hope of finding and saving Hagrid; he ran so fast that they were halfway toward the forest before they were brought up short again.

The air around them had frozen: Harry's breath caught and solidified in his chest. Shapes moved out in the darkness, swirling figures of concentrated blackness, moving in a great wave toward the castle, their faces hooded and their breath rattling. . . .

Ron and Hermione closed in beside him as the sounds of fighting behind them grew suddenly muted, deadened, because a silence only dementors could bring was falling thickly through the night, and Fred was gone, and Hagrid was surely dying or already dead. . . .

"Come on, Harry!" said Hermione's voice from a very long way away. "Patronuses, Harry, come on!"

He raised his wand, but a dull hopelessness was spreading through him: How many more lay dead that he did not yet know about; he felt as though his soul had already half left his body. . . .

"HARRY, COME ON!" screamed Hermione.

A hundred dementors were advancing, gliding toward them, sucking their way closer to Harry's despair, which was like a promise of a feast. . . .

He saw Ron's silver terrier burst into the air, flicker feebly, and expire; he saw Hermione's otter twist in midair and fade; and his own wand trembled in his hand, and he almost welcomed the oncoming oblivion, the promise of nothing, of no feeling. . . .

And then a silver hare, a boar, and a fox soared past Harry, Ron, and Hermione's heads: The dementors fell back before the creatures'

approach. Three more people had arrived out of the darkness to stand beside them, their wands outstretched, continuing to cast their Patronuses: Luna, Ernie, and Seamus.

"That's right," said Luna encouragingly, as if they were back in the Room of Requirement and this was simply spell practice for the D.A. "That's right, Harry . . . come on, think of something happy. . . ."

"Something happy?" he said, his voice cracked.

"We're all still here," she whispered, "we're still fighting. Come on, now. . . ."

There was a silver spark, then a wavering light, and then, with the greatest effort it had ever cost him, the stag burst from the end of Harry's wand. It cantered forward, and now the dementors scattered in earnest, and immediately the night was mild again, but the sounds of the surrounding battle were loud in his ears.

"Can't thank you enough," said Ron shakily, turning to Luna, Ernie, and Seamus, "you just saved —"

With a roar and an earth-quaking tremor, another giant came lurching out of the darkness from the direction of the forest, brandishing a club taller than any of them.

"RUN!" Harry shouted again, but the others needed no telling: They all scattered, and not a second too soon, for next moment the creature's vast foot had fallen exactly where they had been standing. Harry looked round: Ron and Hermione were following him, but the other three had vanished back into the battle.

"Let's get out of range!" yelled Ron as the giant swung its club again and its bellows echoed through the night, across the grounds where bursts of red and green light continued to illuminate the

darkness.

"The Whomping Willow," said Harry, "go!"

Somehow he walled it all up in his mind, crammed it into a small space into which he could not look now: Thoughts of Fred and Hagrid, and his terror for all the people he loved, scattered in and outside the castle, must all wait, because they had to run, had to reach the snake and Voldemort, because that was, as Hermione said, the only way to end it —

He sprinted, half believing he could outdistance death itself, ignoring the jets of light flying in the darkness all around him, and the sound of the lake crashing like the sea, and the creaking of the Forbidden Forest though the night was windless; through grounds that seemed themselves to have risen in rebellion, he ran faster than he had ever moved in his life, and it was he who saw the great tree first, the Willow that protected the secret at its roots with whiplike, slashing branches.

Panting and gasping, Harry slowed down, skirting the Willow's swiping branches, peering through the darkness toward its thick trunk, trying to see the single knot in the bark of the old tree that would paralyze it. Ron and Hermione caught up, Hermione so out of breath she could not speak.

"How — how're we going to get in?" panted Ron. "I can — see the place — if we just had — Crookshanks again —"

"Crookshanks?" wheezed Hermione, bent double, clutching her chest. *"Are you a wizard, or what?"*

"Oh — right — yeah —"

Ron looked around, then directed his wand at a twig on the ground

and said, *"Wingardium Leviosa!"* The twig flew up from the ground, spun through the air as if caught by a gust of wind, then zoomed directly at the trunk through the Willow's ominously swaying branches. It jabbed at a place near the roots, and at once, the writhing tree became still.

"Perfect!" panted Hermione.

"Wait."

For one teetering second, while the crashes and booms of the battle filled the air, Harry hesitated. Voldemort wanted him to do this, wanted him to come . . . Was he leading Ron and Hermione into a trap?

But then the reality seemed to close upon him, cruel and plain: The only way forward was to kill the snake, and the snake was where Voldemort was, and Voldemort was at the end of this tunnel. . . .

"Harry, we're coming, just get in there!" said Ron, pushing him forward.

Harry wriggled into the earthy passage hidden in the tree's roots. It was a much tighter squeeze than it had been the last time they had entered it. The tunnel was low-ceilinged: They had had to double up to move through it nearly four years previously; now there was nothing for it but to crawl. Harry went first, his wand illuminated, expecting at any moment to meet barriers, but none came. They moved in silence, Harry's gaze fixed upon the swinging beam of the wand held in his fist.

At last the tunnel began to slope upward and Harry saw a sliver of light ahead. Hermione tugged at his ankle.

"The Cloak!" she whispered. "Put the Cloak on!"

He groped behind him and she forced the bundle of slippery cloth into his free hand. With difficulty he dragged it over himself, murmured, "*Nox,*" extinguishing his wandlight, and continued on his hands and knees, as silently as possible, all his senses straining, expecting every second to be discovered, to hear a cold clear voice, see a flash of green light.

And then he heard voices coming from the room directly ahead of them, only slightly muffled by the fact that the opening at the end of the tunnel had been blocked up by what looked like an old crate. Hardly daring to breathe, Harry edged right up to the opening and peered through a tiny gap left between crate and wall.

The room beyond was dimly lit, but he could see Nagini, swirling and coiling like a serpent underwater, safe in her enchanted, starry sphere, which floated unsupported in midair. He could see the edge of a table, and a long-fingered white hand toying with a wand. Then Snape spoke, and Harry's heart lurched: Snape was inches away from where he crouched, hidden.

". . . my Lord, their resistance is crumbling —"

"— and it is doing so without your help," said Voldemort in his high, clear voice. "Skilled wizard though you are, Severus, I do not think you will make much difference now. We are almost there . . . almost."

"Let me find the boy. Let me bring you Potter. I know I can find him, my Lord. Please."

Snape strode past the gap, and Harry drew back a little, keeping his eyes fixed upon Nagini, wondering whether there was any spell that might penetrate the protection surrounding her, but he could not

think of anything. One failed attempt, and he would give away his position. . . .

Voldemort stood up. Harry could see him now, see the red eyes, the flattened, serpentine face, the pallor of him gleaming slightly in the semidarkness.

"I have a problem, Severus," said Voldemort softly.

"My Lord?" said Snape.

Voldemort raised the Elder Wand, holding it as delicately and precisely as a conductor's baton.

"Why doesn't it work for me, Severus?"

In the silence Harry imagined he could hear the snake hissing slightly as it coiled and uncoiled — or was it Voldemort's sibilant sigh lingering on the air?

"My — my Lord?" said Snape blankly. "I do not understand. You — you have performed extraordinary magic with that wand."

"No," said Voldemort. "I have performed my usual magic. I am extraordinary, but this wand . . . no. It has not revealed the wonders it has promised. I feel no difference between this wand and the one I procured from Ollivander all those years ago."

Voldemort's tone was musing, calm, but Harry's scar had begun to throb and pulse: Pain was building in his forehead, and he could feel that controlled sense of fury building inside Voldemort.

"No difference," said Voldemort again.

Snape did not speak. Harry could not see his face: He wondered whether Snape sensed danger, was trying to find the right words to reassure his master.

Voldemort started to move around the room: Harry lost sight of him

for seconds as he prowled, speaking in that same measured voice, while the pain and fury mounted in Harry.

"I have thought long and hard, Severus. . . . Do you know why I have called you back from the battle?"

And for a moment Harry saw Snape's profile: His eyes were fixed upon the coiling snake in its enchanted cage.

"No, my Lord, but I beg you will let me return. Let me find Potter."

"You sound like Lucius. Neither of you understands Potter as I do. He does not need finding. Potter will come to me. I know his weakness, you see, his one great flaw. He will hate watching the others struck down around him, knowing that it is for him that it happens. He will want to stop it at any cost. He will come."

"But my Lord, he might be killed accidentally by one other than yourself —"

"My instructions to my Death Eaters have been perfectly clear. Capture Potter. Kill his friends — the more, the better — but do not kill him.

"But it is of you that I wished to speak, Severus, not Harry Potter. You have been very valuable to me. Very valuable."

"My Lord knows I seek only to serve him. But — let me go and find the boy, my Lord. Let me bring him to you. I know I can —"

"I have told you, no!" said Voldemort, and Harry caught the glint of red in his eyes as he turned again, and the swishing of his cloak was like the slithering of a snake, and he felt Voldemort's impatience in his burning scar. "My concern at the moment, Severus, is what will happen when I finally meet the boy!"

"My Lord, there can be no question, surely — ?"

"— but there *is* a question, Severus. There is."

Voldemort halted, and Harry could see him plainly again as he slid the Elder Wand through his white fingers, staring at Snape.

"Why did both the wands I have used fail when directed at Harry Potter?"

"I — I cannot answer that, my Lord."

"Can't you?"

The stab of rage felt like a spike driven through Harry's head: He forced his own fist into his mouth to stop himself from crying out in pain. He closed his eyes, and suddenly he was Voldemort, looking into Snape's pale face.

"My wand of yew did everything of which I asked it, Severus, except to kill Harry Potter. Twice it failed. Ollivander told me under torture of the twin cores, told me to take another's wand. I did so, but Lucius's wand shattered upon meeting Potter's."

"I — I have no explanation, my Lord."

Snape was not looking at Voldemort now. His dark eyes were still fixed upon the coiling serpent in its protective sphere.

"I sought a third wand, Severus. The Elder Wand, the Wand of Destiny, the Deathstick. I took it from its previous master. I took it from the grave of Albus Dumbledore."

And now Snape looked at Voldemort, and Snape's face was like a death mask. It was marble white and so still that when he spoke, it was a shock to see that anyone lived behind the blank eyes.

"My Lord — let me go to the boy —"

"All this long night, when I am on the brink of victory, I have sat here," said Voldemort, his voice barely louder than a whisper,

"wondering, wondering, why the Elder Wand refuses to be what it ought to be, refuses to perform as legend says it must perform for its rightful owner . . . and I think I have the answer."

Snape did not speak.

"Perhaps you already know it? You are a clever man, after all, Severus. You have been a good and faithful servant, and I regret what must happen."

"My Lord —"

"The Elder Wand cannot serve me properly, Severus, because I am not its true master. The Elder Wand belongs to the wizard who killed its last owner. You killed Albus Dumbledore. While you live, Severus, the Elder Wand cannot be truly mine."

"My Lord!" Snape protested, raising his wand.

"It cannot be any other way," said Voldemort. "I must master the wand, Severus. Master the wand, and I master Potter at last."

And Voldemort swiped the air with the Elder Wand. It did nothing to Snape, who for a split second seemed to think he had been reprieved: But then Voldemort's intention became clear. The snake's cage was rolling through the air, and before Snape could do anything more than yell, it had encased him, head and shoulders, and Voldemort spoke in Parseltongue.

"Kill."

There was a terrible scream. Harry saw Snape's face losing the little color it had left; it whitened as his black eyes widened, as the snake's fangs pierced his neck, as he failed to push the enchanted cage off himself, as his knees gave way and he fell to the floor.

"I regret it," said Voldemort coldly.

He turned away; there was no sadness in him, no remorse. It was time to leave this shack and take charge, with a wand that would now do his full bidding. He pointed it at the starry cage holding the snake, which drifted upward, off Snape, who fell sideways onto the floor, blood gushing from the wounds in his neck. Voldemort swept from the room without a backward glance, and the great serpent floated after him in its huge protective sphere.

Back in the tunnel and his own mind, Harry opened his eyes: He had drawn blood biting down on his knuckles in the effort not to shout out. Now he was looking through the tiny crack between crate and wall, watching a foot in a black boot trembling on the floor.

"Harry!" breathed Hermione behind him, but he had already pointed his wand at the crate blocking his view. It lifted an inch into the air and drifted sideways silently. As quietly as he could, he pulled himself up into the room.

He did not know why he was doing it, why he was approaching the dying man: He did not know what he felt as he saw Snape's white face, and the fingers trying to staunch the bloody wound at his neck. Harry took off the Invisibility Cloak and looked down upon the man he hated, whose widening black eyes found Harry as he tried to speak. Harry bent over him, and Snape seized the front of his robes and pulled him close.

A terrible rasping, gurgling noise issued from Snape's throat.

"Take . . . it. . . . Take . . . it. . . ."

Something more than blood was leaking from Snape. Silvery blue, neither gas nor liquid, it gushed from his mouth and his ears and his eyes, and Harry knew what it was, but did not know what to do —

A flask, conjured from thin air, was thrust into his shaking hands by Hermione. Harry lifted the silvery substance into it with his wand. When the flask was full to the brim, and Snape looked as though there was no blood left in him, his grip on Harry's robes slackened.

"Look . . . at . . . me. . . ." he whispered.

The green eyes found the black, but after a second, something in the depths of the dark pair seemed to vanish, leaving them fixed, blank, and empty. The hand holding Harry thudded to the floor, and Snape moved no more.

— HOOFSTUK TWEE-EN-DERTIG —

Die Vlierstaf

Die wêreld het tot 'n einde gekom, so hoekom hou die geveg nie op en word die kasteel nie van afgryse stil en lê al die vegters nie hulle wapens neer nie? Harry se brein is in vryval, dit tol buite beheer, nie in staat om die onmoontlike te aanvaar nie, want Fred Weasley kan nie dood wees nie, die bewyse wat al sy sintuie waarneem, moet 'n leuen wees –

En dan val 'n liggaam verby die opening wat aan die kant van die skool ingeskiet is en vloeke vlieg uit die donker op hulle af en tref die muur agter hulle koppe.

"Val plat!" skree Harry terwyl nog vloeke deur die nag vlieg: hy en Ron het Hermione tegelyk gegryp en haar op die vloer platgedruk, maar Percy lê oor Fred se liggaam om hom teen verdere leed te beskerm, en toe Harry roep: "Percy, komaan, ons moet hier wegkom!" skud hy sy kop.

"Percy!" Harry sien traanstrepe oor Ron se vuil gesig toe hy sy ouer broer se skouers gryp en hom probeer optrek, maar Percy weier om hom te verroer. "Percy, jy kan niks vir hom doen nie! Ons gaan –"

Hermione gil; Harry draai om en hoef nie te vra hoekom nie. 'n Monsteragtige spinnekop so groot soos 'n klein motor probeer deur die yslike opening in die muur klim: een van Aragog se nasate het by die geveg aangesluit.

Ron en Harry gil saam; hulle towerspreuke bots en die monster word agtertoe gegooi, sy bene ruk grusaam en hy verdwyn in die donkerte.

"Hy't vriende saamgebring!" roep Harry vir die ander terwyl hy oor die rand van die kasteel loer deur die opening wat die vloeke in die muur geskiet het: nog reusespinnekoppe klim teen die gebou op; die Doodseters moes die Verbode Woud binnegedring en hulle bevry het. Harry vuur Bedwelmspreuke op hulle af en stamp die voorste monster af: hy val op sy maats en hulle rol by die gebou af, uit die oog. Dan vlieg daar nog vloeke oor Harry se kop, so naby dat die geweld daarvan deur sy hare waai.

"Weg is ons, NOU!"

Harry stoot Hermione en Ron voor hom uit, maar buk dan af en gryp Fred se liggaam onder die armholtes. Percy besef wat Harry probeer doen, laat los die liggaam en help hom om Fred uit die pad te trek terwyl hulle laag buk om die vloeke wat buite van die terrein af op hulle neerreën, te ontwyk.

"Hier," sê Harry, en hulle sit hom neer in 'n nis waar daar vroeër 'n wapenrusting gestaan het. Hy kan dit nie verduur om 'n oomblik langer as wat hy moet na Fred te kyk nie, en toe hy seker is die liggaam is goed weggesteek, sit hy Ron en Hermione agterna. Malfoy en Goyle het verdwyn, maar aan die einde van die gang, wat nou vol stof en vallende steenwerk is en waarvan die vensters lankal nie meer ruite in het nie, sien hy 'n klomp mense vorentoe en agtertoe hardloop, sonder dat hy kan uitmaak of hulle vriend of vyand is. Percy storm om die hoek, bulk soos 'n bul: "ROOKWOOD!" en nael in die rigting van 'n lang man wat 'n paar studente agternasit.

"Harry, hier in!" skree Hermione.

Sy het Ron agter 'n tapisserie ingetrek. Dit lyk of hulle stoei, en vir 'n waansinnige oomblik dink Harry hulle omhels mekaar weer; dan sien hy Hermione probeer Ron keer om agter Percy aan te hardloop.

"Luister na my – LUISTER, RON!"

"Ek wil help – ek wil Doodseters doodmaak –"

Sy gesig is verwronge, besmeer met stof en rook, en hy ruk van woede en verdriet.

"Ron, ons is die enigstes wat 'n einde hieraan kan maak! Asseblief – Ron – ons moet die slang kry, ons moet die slang doodmaak!" sê Hermione.

Maar Harry weet hoe Ron voel: om nog 'n Horcrux agterna te sit, kan nie so bevredigend wees soos om wraak te neem nie; hy wil ook veg, die mense straf wat Fred doodgemaak het, en hy wil die ander Weasleys opspoor, en bowenal seker maak, heeltemal seker maak, Ginny is nie – maar hy kan nie toelaat dat daardie gedagte vorm aanneem in sy kop nie –

"Ons *sal* veg!" sê Hermione. "Ons sal moet, om by die slang uit te kom! Maar ons moet nie nou uit die oog verloor wat ons veronderstel is om te d – doen nie! Ons is die enigstes wat 'n einde hieraan kan maak!"

Sy huil ook en sy vee haar gesig aan haar geskeurde en geskroeide mou af terwyl sy praat, maar sy haal diep en stadig asem om haarself te kalmeer en draai na Harry terwyl sy Ron nog steeds styf vashou.

"Jy moet uitvind waar Voldemort is, want hy sal die slang by hom hê, of hoe? Doen dit, Harry – kyk binne-in hom!"

Hoekom is dit so maklik? Omdat die litteken al ure lank brand en smag om Voldemort se gedagtes vir hom te wys? Hy maak sy oë op haar bevel toe en onmiddellik word die geskree en knalle en die geveg se kakofonie van klanke uitgedoof totdat dit vaag word, asof hy ver, ver weg daarvandaan staan . . .

Hy staan in die middel van 'n verlate maar vreemd bekende vertrek; muurpapier dop van die mure af en al die vensters behalwe een is toegespyker. Die geluide van die aanslag op die kasteel is gedemp en in die verte. Deur een oop venster is ontploffings van lig sigbaar daar ver waar die kasteel staan, maar binne-in die vertrek is dit donker, afgesien van 'n enkele olielamp.

Hy rol sy towerstaf tussen sy vingers terwyl hy daarna kyk. Sy gedagtes is by die Vertrek in die kasteel, die geheime Vertrek wat net hy ontdek het, die Vertrek, soos die Kamer, wat net iemand wat intelligent en geslepe en weetgierig is, kan vind . . . Hy is vol selfvertroue dat die seun nie die diadeem sal kry nie . . . hoewel Dumbledore se marionet baie verder gevorder het as wat hy ooit verwag het . . . te ver . . .

"My Heer," sê 'n stem, desperaat en gebroke. Hy draai om: daar sit Lucius Malfoy in die donkerste hoek, toiingrig en steeds met die letsels van die straf waaraan hy ná die seun se vorige ontsnapping onderwerp is. Een oog is toe en opgeswel. "My Heer . . . asseblief . . . my seun . . ."

"As jou seun dood is, is dit nie my skuld nie, Lucius. Hy het nie soos die res van die Slytherins by my kom aansluit nie. Miskien het hy besluit om met Harry Potter bevriend te raak."

"Nee – nooit," fluister Lucius.

"Jy moet hoop hy het nie."

"Is – is u nie bang, my Heer, dat iemand anders as u Potter dalk sal doodmaak nie?" vra Malfoy met 'n bewende stem. "Sal dit nie miskien . . . vergewe my . . . wyser wees om hierdie geveg stop te sit, by die kasteel in te gaan en self na hom te gaan s – soek nie?"

"Hou op huigel, Lucius. Jy wil hê ek moet die geveg beëindig sodat jy kan uitvind wat van jou seun geword het. En ek hoef nie na Potter te gaan soek nie. Voor die nag om is, sal Potter my kom soek."

Voldemort kyk weer af na die towerstaf in sy vingers. Dit bekommer hom . . . en dinge wat die Heer Voldemort bekommer, moet reggestel word . . .

"Gaan haal vir Snape."

"Snape, m – my Heer?"

"Snape. Nou. Ek het hom nodig. Daar is 'n – diens – wat ek van hom verlang. Gaan."

Lucius Malfoy verlaat die vertrek bevrees, en struikel effens in die skemer. Voldemort bly daar staan en rol weer die towerstaf tussen sy vingers terwyl hy daarna staar.

"Dit is die enigste manier, Nagini," fluister hy en kyk om na die groot, dik slang wat nou tussen hemel en aarde sweef, grasieus opgekrul binne-in die betowerde, beskermende ruimte wat hy vir haar geskep het: 'n sterbesaaide, deursigtige sfeer, iets tussen 'n glinsterende hok en 'n tenk.

Harry onttrek hom hygend en maak sy oë oop; terselfdertyd word sy ore oorweldig deur die geskree, geknal en lawaai van die geveg.

"Hy's in die Kermende Krot. Die slang is by hom, daar is een of ander towerbeskerming om haar. Hy't nou net vir Lucius Malfoy gestuur om Snape te gaan haal."

"Voldemort is in die Kermende Krot?" vra Hermione briesend. "Hy's nie – hy's nie eens besig om te *baklei* nie?"

"Hy dink nie dis nodig om te baklei nie," sê Harry. "Hy dink ek sal na hom toe gaan."

"Maar hoekom?"

"Hy weet ek's agter die Horcruxe aan – hy hou Nagini naby hom – ek sal eenvoudig na hom toe *moet* gaan om naby daai ding te kom –"

"Reg," sê Ron en maak sy skouers reguit. "So jy kan nie gaan nie, want dis wat hy wil hê, wat hy verwag. Bly jy hier en kyk na Hermione, dan gaan ek om –"

Harry onderbreek Ron.

"Bly julle twee hier, ek sal onder die Mantel gaan en terugkom sodra ek –"

"Nee," sê Hermione, "dit maak baie meer sin dat ek die Mantel vat en –"

"Moenie eens daaraan dink nie," snou Ron.

Voor Hermione verder kan kom as: "Ron, ek kan net so goed soos –" word die tapisserie aan die bopunt van die trap waarop hulle staan, oopgeruk.

"POTTER!"

Twee gemaskerde Doodseters staan daar, maar voor hulle hul towerstawwe kan oplig, skree Hermione: *"Glisseo!"*

Die trap onder hul voete verander in 'n glygang en sy, Harry en Ron skuif daarin af, nie in staat om hulle spoed te beheer nie, maar so vinnig dat die Doodseters se Bedwelmspreuke oor hulle koppe

verbyvlieg. Hulle skiet deur die tapisserie wat die onderkant verberg, tol tot op die vloer en tref die oorkantste muur.

"*Duro!*" roep Hermione uit terwyl sy haar towerstaf op die tapisserie rig en daar is twee harde, nare knarsgeluide toe dit in klip verander en die Doodseters wat hulle agtervolg daarteen opgefrommel word.

"Staan terug!" skree Ron, en hy, Harry en Hermione druk hulle plat teen 'n deur terwyl 'n trop galoppende lessenaars wat deur professor McGanagall aangejaag word, verbydawer. Dit lyk nie of sy hulle raak sien nie; haar hare is los en daar is 'n sny in haar wang. Terwyl sy om die hoek beweeg, hoor hulle hoe sy skree: "STORM!"

"Harry, gooi die Mantel oor jou," sê Hermione. "Vergeet van ons –"

Maar hy gooi dit oor hulle al drie; al is hulle groot, is hy seker niemand sal hulle liggaamlose voete deur die stof wat dik in die lug hang, die vallende klippe en die flitsende towerspreuke sien nie.

Hulle hardloop by die volgende trap af en bevind hulle in 'n gang vol vegtende mense. Die portrette aan weerskante van die vegters is stampvol figure wat advies en aanmoediging uitroep terwyl gemaskerde sowel as ongemaskerde Doodseters in tweegevegte met studente en onderwysers gewikkel is. Dean het vir hom 'n towerstaf verower, want hy is van aangesig tot aangesig met Dolohof, en Parvati met Travers. Harry, Ron en Hermione lig hulle towerstawwe onmiddellik, gereed om aan te val, maar die vegters weef en maal so deur mekaar dat hulle na alle waarskynlikheid een van hulle eie mense sal tref as hulle vloeke afvuur. Terwyl hulle so slaggereed staan, op soek na 'n kans om op te tree, kom daar 'n harde "*whieeeeeeeeee!*" en Harry kyk op en sien Peeves oor hulle verbyzoem. Hy gooi Snargaloefpeule op die Doodseters af en skielik is hulle koppe oortrek met wriemelende groen knolle wat soos vet wurms lyk.

"Arg!"

'n Hand vol knolle het die Mantel bokant Ron se kop getref; die slymerige groen wortels hang onverklaarbaar in die lug terwyl Ron hulle probeer afskud.

"Iemand daar is onsigbaar!" skree 'n gemaskerde Doodseter en wys na hulle.

Dean benut die feit dat die Doodseter se aandag vir 'n oomblik afgelei is en slaan hom uit met 'n Bedwelmspreuk; Dolohof probeer wraak neem, en Parvati vuur 'n Vasbindspreuk op hom af.

"KOMAAN!" roep Harry, en hy, Ron en Hermione trek die Mantel styf om hulle vas en laat spaander met ingetrekte koppe

tussen die vegters deur na die bokant van die marmertrap wat na die Ingangsportaal toe lei, terwyl hulle hier en daar op plassies Snargaloefsap gly.

"Ek's Draco Malfoy, ek's Draco, ek's aan julle kant!"

Draco staan op die boonste trapportaal en pleit by nog 'n gemaskerde Doodseter. Harry Bedwelm die Doodseter in die verbygaan: Malfoy kyk stralend rond op soek na sy redder, en Ron moker hom van onder die Mantel met die vuis. Malfoy slaan verbysterd agteroor op die Doodseter neer, sy mond bebloed.

"En dis die tweede keer dat ons vanaand jou lewe red, jou tweegatjakkals!" sê Ron.

Daar is nog tweegevegte oral op die trap en in die Saal, Doodseters net waar Harry kyk: Yaxley is naby die voordeure in 'n geveg met Flitwick gewikkel, 'n gemaskerde Doodseter baklei teen Kingsley hier reg langsaan hulle. Studente hardloop in alle rigtings, party dra of sleep beseerde vriende. Harry mik 'n Bedwelmspreuk na die gemaskerde Doodseter; dis mis, maar tref amper vir Neville wat uit die niet verskyn en arms vol Giftige Tentakulas rondswaai wat hulle dolgelukkig om die naaste Doodseter vasdraai en hom begin inkatrol.

Harry, Ron en Hermione nael af met die marmertrap: glas versplinter links van hulle en die smaragde in Slytherin se uurglas, wat die huispunte aangeteken het, stroom oral uit sodat mense in die hardloop gly en steier. Twee liggame val van die boonste balkon af toe hulle die grondvloer bereik en 'n grys warreling, wat Harry vir 'n dier aansien, snel op vier bene deur die Saal en sink sy tande in een van die twee wat geval het.

"NEE!" skree Hermione en met 'n oorverdowende knal uit haar towerstaf word Fenrir Greyback afgegooi van Lavender Brown se liggaam, wat floutjies roer. Hy tref die marmertrapreling en sukkel om weer op die been te kom. Dan met 'n helderwit ligflits en 'n gekraak, val 'n kristalbal op sy kop en hy sak inmekaar en lê roerloos op die vloer.

"Ek het nog!" skree professor Trelawney oor die reling. "Nog vir enigiemand wat dit wil hê! Hier –"

En met 'n beweging soos iemand wat in tennis afslaan, haal sy nog 'n enorme kristalsfeer uit haar handsak en swaai haar towerstaf deur die lug: die bal vlieg deur die Saal en spat deur 'n venster. Op daardie oomblik bars die twee swaar houtvoordeure oop en heelparty van die reusagtige spinnekoppe begin met geweld hulle weg deur die Ingangsportaal baan.

Angskrete klief die lug: die vegters spat uitmekaar, Doodseters

sowel as Hogwarters, en rooi en groen ligstrale vlieg tussen die aankomende monsters in, wat sidder en oprys, meer vreesaanjaend as ooit.

"Hoe gaan ons uitkom?" vra Ron bo al die geskree, maar voor Harry of Hermione kan antwoord, word hulle eenkant toe gegooi: Hagrid het dawerend by die trap afgekom en swaai sy pienk blommetjiesambreel rond.

"Moet hulle nie seermaak nie, moet hulle nie seermaak nie!" bulder hy.

"HAGRID, NEE!"

Harry vergeet alle ander dinge: hy spring onder die mantel uit en hardloop vooroor gebuk om te koes vir die vloeke wat die hele Portaal verlig.

"HAGRID, KOM TERUG!"

Maar hy is nog nie eens halfpad na Hagrid nie toe hy dit sien gebeur: Hagrid verdwyn tussen die spinnekoppe, en met 'n groot geskarrel, 'n aaklige, krioelende beweging, retireer hulle onder die aanslag van towerspreuke met Hagrid begrawe tussen hulle.

"HAGRID!"

Harry hoor iemand sy naam roep, hy gee nie om of dit vriend of vyand is nie: hy nael by die voorste trap af na die duisternis buite, en die spinnekoppe swerm weg met hulle prooi, en hy kan hoegenaamd niks van Hagrid sien nie.

"HAGRID!"

Hy verbeel hom hy sien 'n enorme arm wat te midde van die menigte spinnekoppe waai, maar toe hy hulle probeer agternasit, word sy pad versper deur 'n kolossale voet wat uit die donker neerplof en die grond waarop dit land, laat sidder. Hy kyk op: daar staan 'n reus voor hom, sy kop in skadu's gehul, want die lig wat by die kasteel se deure uitkom, verlig net sy harige skene wat so dik soos boomstompe is. Met een brutale, vloeiende beweging laat sy tamaai vuis 'n boonste venster aan skerwe spat: glas reën op Harry neer en dwing hom om te retireer en in die deuropening te skuil.

"O maggies –!" sê Hermione toe sy en Ron by Harry kom en opstaar na die reus wat nou probeer om mense deur die boonste venster te gryp.

"MOENIE!" skree Ron en gryp Hermione se hand toe sy haar towerstaf lig. "As jy hom Bedwelm, sal hy die helfte van die kasteel te pletter val –"

"HAGGER!"

Ghrop kom om die hoek van die kasteel geslinger; Harry besef nou eers Ghrop is inderdaad klein vir 'n reus. Die massiewe mon-

ster, wat mense op die boonste verdiepings probeer verbrysel, kyk om en brul. Die kliptrap skud toe hy woedend na sy kleiner bloedverwant toe strompel en Ghrop se skewe mond val oop en wys sy geel tande, so groot soos halwe bakstene, en dan pak hulle mekaar beet soos twee wilde leeus.

"HARDLOOP!" bulder Harry. Die nag is vol afgryslike krete en houe soos die reuse stoei, en hy gryp Hermione se hand en nael by die trap af na die tuin met Ron agterna. Harry het nog nie hoop opgegee om Hagrid te kry en te red nie; hy hardloop so vinnig dat hulle halfpad na die Woud toe is voor hulle weer tot stilstand gebring word.

Die lug om hulle het gevries: Harry se asem word in sy bors vasgevang en gestol. Figure verskyn uit die duisternis, dwarrelende figure van gekonsentreerde swart beweeg in 'n groot golf na die kasteel toe, hulle gesigte onder mantelkappe en hulle asemhaling roggelend . . .

Ron en Hermione kom staan teen hom terwyl die geluide van die geveg agter hulle skielik verdoof en verdwyn, want 'n stilte wat net deur Dementors veroorsaak kan word, daal op die nag neer . . .

"Komaan, Harry!" sê Hermione se stem van baie ver weg, "Patronusse, Harry, komaan!"

Hy lig sy towerstaf, maar 'n doodse wanhoop sprei deur hom: Fred is weg, en Hagrid is sekerlik besig om dood te gaan of klaar dood; hoeveel meer is al dood van wie hy nog nie weet nie; dit voel of sy siel reeds sy liggaam halfpad verlaat het . . .

"HARRY, KOMAAN!" skree Hermione.

'n Honderd Dementors kom nader, sweef na hulle toe, suig hulle pad oop tot by Harry se wanhoop wat soos die belofte van 'n fees is . . .

Hy sien Ron se silwer terriër die lug in bars, flou flikker en dan wegsterf; hy sien Hermione se otter tussen hemel en aarde in die lug fladder en verflou, en sy eie towerstaf bewe in sy hand, en hy verwelkom amper die naderende vergetelheid, die belofte van niks, van geen gevoel nie . . .

En dan seil 'n silwer haas, 'n wildevark en 'n jakkals verby Harry, Ron en Hermione se koppe: die Dementors val terug voor die aankomende dierasies. Drie ander mense het uit die duisternis verskyn en staan nou langs hulle met hulle towerstawwe uitgestrek terwyl hulle voortgaan om Patronusse op te tower: Luna, Ernie en Seamus.

"Dis reg," sê Luna bemoedigend asof hulle weer terug in die Vertrek van Vereistes is en die DS maar net hulle towerspreuke

oefen. "Dis reg, Harry . . . Komaan, dink aan iets wat jou gelukkig maak . . ."

"Iets wat my gelukkig maak?" sê hy met 'n skor stem.

"Ons is almal nog hier," fluister sy, "ons veg nog steeds. Komaan, nou . . ."

Daar is 'n silwer vonk, dan 'n aarselende lig en dan, met die grootste inspanning wat dit nog ooit van hom geverg het, bars die takbok by die punt van Harry se towerstaf uit. Die Patronus draf vorentoe en nou spat die Dementors in alle erns uitmekaar en die nag is dadelik weer getemper, maar die geluide van die geveg om hulle is hard in hulle ore.

"Kan nie vir julle genoeg dankie sê nie," sê Ron bewerig en draai na Luna, Ernie en Seamus. "Julle't nou net gekeer –"

Met 'n gebrul en 'n aardskuddende trilling kom nog 'n reus uit die donker van die Woud af uitgestorm met 'n swaaiende knuppel wat groter as enigeen van hulle is.

"HARDLOOP!" skree Harry weer, maar dit was nie nodig nie: hulle spat uitmekaar, en nie 'n sekonde te gou nie, want die volgende oomblik kom die dierasie se yslike voet presies op die plek neer waar hulle gestaan het. Harry kyk om: Ron en Hermione volg hom, maar die ander drie het tussen die vegters verdwyn.

"Kom uit sy pad uit!" gil Ron toe die reus sy knuppel weer swaai en sy gebrul deur die nag weerklink oor die terrein waar ontploffings van rooi en groen lig die duisternis verlig.

"Die Woelige Wilg," sê Harry. "Gou!"

Op 'n manier bou hy 'n muur om alles in sy kop, stop dit in 'n hoekie waar hy nie nou kan inkyk nie: gedagtes aan Fred en Hagrid, en sy angs oor al die mense wat hy liefhet wat in en buite die kasteel versprei is, moet alles wag, want hulle moet hardloop, by die slang uitkom, en by Voldemort, want dit is, soos Hermione gesê het, die enigste manier om 'n einde aan alles te maak –

Hy nael vir al wat hy werd is, dink half hy kan vir die dood self weghardloop, ignoreer die ligstrale wat oral in die donker om hom rondvlieg, en die geluid van die meer wat soos die see ruis, en die Verbode Woud se gekraak, al is die nag windloos; deur dele van die tuin wat lyk of hulle self ook opgestaan het om te rebelleer; hy hardloop vinniger as ooit in sy lewe, en dit is hy wat die groot boom eerste sien, die Wilg wat die geheim by sy wortels beskerm met takke wat soos swepe slaan.

Harry kom hygend en uitasem tot stilstand en beweeg dan om die Wilg se swiepende takke terwyl hy deur die duisternis na die dik stam tuur om te probeer sien waar die enkele knoets in die ou

boom is wat dit sal verlam. Ron en Hermione haal hom in; Hermione is so uitasem dat sy nie kan praat nie.

"Hoe – hoe gaan ons inkom?" hyg Ron. "Ek kan – die plek sien – as ons net – weer vir Kromskeen kon kry –"

"Kromskeen?" fluit Hermione wat vooroor gebuk staan en haar bors vashou. *"Is jy 'n towenaar, of nie?"*

"O – reg – ja –"

Ron kyk rond, mik dan met sy towerstaf na 'n takkie op die grond en sê: "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" Die takkie vlieg van die grond af op, tol deur die lug asof dit deur 'n windvlaag opgeraap is en zoem dan reguit na die stam toe deur die Wilg se takke wat onheilspellend wieg. Dit steek na 'n plek naby die wortels en skielik word die wriemelende boom stil.

"Perfek!" hyg Hermione.

"Wag."

Vir een wankelende sekonde, terwyl die geveg se gedreun en geraas die lug vul, huiwer Harry. Voldemort wil hê hy moet dit doen, wil hê hy moet na hom toe kom . . . Lei hy Ron en Hermione in 'n lokval?

Maar dan is dit asof die realiteit hom oorweldig, wreed en eenvoudig: die enigste pad vorentoe is om die slang dood te maak, en die slang is waar Voldemort is, en Voldemort is aan die einde van hierdie tonnel . . .

"Harry, ons kom, in is jy!" sê Ron en stoot hom vorentoe.

Harry wurm hom in by die grondgang wat tussen die boom se wortels weggesteek is. Hy pas baie moeiliker in as die vorige keer toe hulle hier ingegaan het. Die tonnel het 'n lae plafon: hulle moes vier jaar gelede gebukkend daardeur beweeg; nou sal hulle moet kruip. Harry is vooraan, met sy towerstaf wat lig verskaf; hy verwag enige oomblik 'n versperring, maar daar is niks nie. Hulle beweeg in stilte; Harry se oë vasgenael op die towerstaf in sy hand se swaaiende ligstraal.

Aan die einde begin die tonnel na bo loop en Harry sien 'n flentertjie lig vorentoe. Hermione trek aan sy enkel.

"Die Mantel!" fluister sy. "Gooi die Mantel oor jou!"

Hy tas agter hom rond en sy stop die bondel gladde materiaal in sy hand. Hy trek dit met moeite oor hom en prewel: "*Nox,*" doof so sy towerstaf se lig uit en kruip so sag moontlik op sy hande en knieë verder, al sy sintuie gespanne, en verwag hy gaan enige oomblik ontdek word en 'n koue, helder stem hoor en 'n groen lig sien flits.

En dan hoor hy stemme vanuit die vertrek voor hulle, ietwat gedemp as gevolg van die feit dat die opening aan die einde van die

tonnel versper word deur iets wat soos 'n ou krat lyk. Harry waag dit skaars om asem te haal, kruip versigtig tot reg by die opening en loer in deur 'n klein skrefie tussen die krat en die muur.

Die vertrek daaragter is dof verlig, maar hy sien Nagini draaiend en kronkelend soos 'n onderwaterslang, veilig in haar betowerde, sterbesaaide sfeer wat sonder steun tussen hemel en aarde sweef. Hy sien die rand van 'n tafel en 'n wit hand met lang vingers wat met 'n towerstaf speel. Dan praat Snape en Harry se hart spring: Snape is duime weg van waar hy ongesiens hurk.

". . . my Heer, hulle weerstand verkrummel –"

"– en dit is nie aan jou hulp te danke nie," sê Voldemort in sy hoë, helder stem. "Bedrewe towenaar ofte nie, Severus, ek dink nie jy sal nou veel van 'n verskil maak nie. Ons is amper daar . . . amper."

"Laat ek die seun soek. Laat ek Potter na u toe bring. Ek weet ek kan hom vind, my Heer. Asseblief."

Snape loop verby die skrefie en Harry deins effens terug, maar sy oë bly op Nagini, en hy wonder of daar enige towerspreuk is wat die beskerming om haar kan binnedring, maar hy kan aan niks dink nie. Een mislukte poging en hy sal sy posisie verklap . . .

Voldemort staan op. Harry sien hom nou, sien sy rooi oë, sy plat, slangagtige neus, sy bleekheid wat effens in die halfdonker glinster.

"Ek het 'n probleem, Severus," sê Voldemort sag.

"My Heer?" sê Snape.

Voldemort lig die Vlierstaf wat hy so delikaat en presies soos 'n dirigent se dirigeerstok vashou.

"Hoekom werk dit nie vir my nie, Severus?"

In die stilte verbeel Harry hom hy hoor die slang sag sis terwyl sy haar opkrul en dan weer loskrul, of is dit Voldemort se sissende sug wat in die lug talm?

"My – my Heer?" sê Snape uitdrukkingloos. "Ek verstaan nie. U – u het buitengewone towerkuns met daardie towerstaf vermag."

"Nee," sê Voldemort. "Ek het my gewone towerkuns beoefen. Ek is buitengewoon, maar hierdie towerstaf . . . nee. Dit het nie die wonders wat dit belowe het, openbaar nie. Ek voel geen verskil tussen hierdie towerstaf en die een wat ek jare gelede by Ollivander gekry het nie."

Voldemort se stemtoon is mymerend, kalm, maar Harry se litteken het begin klop en pols: die pyn in sy voorkop word al hoe erger en hy voel daardie beheerste gevoel van woede in Voldemort opbou.

"Geen verskil nie," sê Voldemort weer.

Snape sê niks. Harry kan nie sy gesig sien nie: hy wonder of Snape gevaar aanvoel, of hy die regte woorde probeer vind om sy meester mee gerus te stel.

Voldemort begin in die vertrek rondbeweeg: Harry verloor hom sekondes lank uit die oog terwyl hy rondloop en in daardie selfde afgemete stem praat terwyl die pyn en woede in Harry opbou.

"Ek het lank en diep gedink, Severus . . . Weet jy hoekom ek jou van die geveg af ontbied het?"

En vir 'n oomblik sien Harry Snape se profiel: sy oë is vasgenael op die krullende slang in haar betowerde hok.

"Nee, my Heer, maar ek vra dat u my laat teruggaan. Laat ek Potter vir u vind."

"Jy klink nes Lucius. Nie een van julle verstaan Potter soos ek nie. Dis nie nodig om hom te vind nie. Potter sal na my toe kom. Sien, ek ken sy swak plek, sy een groot gebrek. Hy sal dit haat om te sien hoe die ander om hom afgemaai word, wetende dat dit as gevolg van hom gebeur. Hy sal dit tot elke prys wil vermy. Hy sal kom."

"Maar my Heer, iemand anders as u kan hom dalk per abuis doodmaak –"

"My bevele aan my Doodseters was baie duidelik. Neem Potter gevange. Maak sy vriende dood – hoe meer, hoe beter – maar moenie hom doodmaak nie.

"Maar dit is oor jou wat ek wou praat, Severus, nie oor Harry Potter nie. Jy was vir my baie waardevol. Baie waardevol."

"My Heer weet ek streef slegs daarna om hom te dien. Maar – laat my gaan en die seun soek, my Heer. Laat ek hom na u toe bring. Ek weet ek kan –"

"Ek het jou gesê, nee!" sê Voldemort, en Harry sien vlugtig die rooi glinstering in sy oë toe hy weer omdraai, en sy mantel suis soos 'n seilende slang, en hy voel Voldemort se ongeduld in sy brandende litteken. "Wat my op die oomblik bekommer, Severus, is wat gaan gebeur wanneer ek die seun uiteindelik ontmoet!"

"My Heer, daar kan tog sekerlik geen twyfel wees nie –?"

"– maar daar *is* 'n vraag, Severus. Daar is."

Voldemort gaan staan en Harry sien hom weer duidelik terwyl hy die Vlierstaf tussen sy wit vingers rol en Snape aanstaar.

"Hoekom het albei die towerstawwe wat ek gebruik het, gefaal toe ek hulle op Harry Potter gerig het?"

"Ek – ek het nie 'n antwoord daarvoor nie, my Heer."

"Nie?"

Die dolksteek van woede voel soos 'n pen wat by Harry se kop

ingeslaan word: hy druk sy vuis in sy mond om te keer dat hy skree van pyn. Hy maak sy oë toe, en skielik is hy Voldemort wat na Snape se bleek gesig kyk.

"My towerstaf van taksishout het alles gedoen wat ek gevra het, Severus, behalwe om Harry Potter dood te maak. Dit het twee keer misluk. Ollivander het onder marteling vir my van die tweelingkerns vertel, vir my gesê om iemand anders se towerstaf te gebruik. Ek het dit gedoen, maar Lucius se towerstaf het aan stukke gebreek toe dit teen Potter s'n te staan kom."

"Ek – ek het nie 'n verduideliking daarvoor nie, my Heer."

Snape kyk nie nou na Voldemort nie. Sy donker oë is steeds vasgenael op die krullende slang in haar beskermende sfeer.

"Ek het 'n derde, gesogte towerstaf bekom, Severus. Die Vlierstaf, die Towerstaf van die Noodlot, die Doodstok. Ek het dit by sy vorige meester afgeneem. Ek het dit uit Albus Dumbledore se graf verwyder."

En nou kyk Snape na Voldemort, en Snape se gesig lyk soos 'n doodsmasker. Dit is marmerwit en so stil dat dit 'n skok is om te sien iemand lewe agter die uitdrukkinglose oë toe hy praat.

"My Heer – laat my na die seun toe gaan –"

"Hierdie hele lang nag, terwyl ek op die randjie van oorwinning is, sit ek al hier," sê Voldemort, wie se stem nou beswaarlik harder as 'n fluistering is, "en ek wonder, wonder hoekom die Vlierstaf weier om te wees wat dit veronderstel is om te wees, weier om te doen wat die legende sê dit vir sy regmatige eienaar moet doen . . . en ek dink ek het die antwoord."

Snape sê niks.

"Miskien weet jy reeds wat dit is? Jy is per slot van rekening 'n slim man, Severus. Jy was 'n goeie en getroue dienskneg en wat moet gebeur, spyt my."

"My Heer –"

"Die Vlierstaf kan my nie na behore dien nie, Severus, want ek is nie sy ware meester nie. Die Vlierstaf behoort aan die towenaar wat sy vorige eienaar om die lewe gebring het. Jy het Albus Dumbledore doodgemaak. Terwyl jy lewe, Severus, kan die Vlierstaf nie waarlik myne wees nie."

"My Heer!" protesteer Snape en lig sy towerstaf.

"Dit kan nie anders nie," sê Voldemort. "Ek moet die towerstaf bemeester, Severus. As ek dit bemeester, sal ek Potter uiteindelik bemeester."

En Voldemort klief die lug met die Vlierstaf. Dit doen niks aan Snape nie en hy dink vir 'n oomblik hy is begenadig, maar dan word

Voldemort se bedoeling duidelik. Die slang se hok rol deur die lug en voor Snape enigiets meer kan doen as om te skree, het dit hom omhul, sy kop en skouers, en Voldemort praat in Parseltaal.

"Maak dood."

Daar is 'n aaklige gil. Harry sien hoe verloor Snape se gesig die bietjie kleur wat daarin oor was; dit word wit en sy swart oë rek terwyl die slang haar tande in sy nek inslaan, terwyl hy tevergeefs probeer om die betowerde glashok van hom af te kry, terwyl sy knieë swik en hy op die vloer neersak.

"Dit spyt my," sê Voldemort koud.

Hy draai weg; daar is geen hartseer in hom nie, geen berou nie. Dit is tyd om weg te kom uit hierdie krot en beheer te neem met 'n towerstaf wat sy bevele nou ten volle sal uitvoer. Hy wys daarmee na die slang se sterbesaaide hok, wat boontoe dryf, weg van Snape wat sywaarts op die vloer val terwyl bloed uit die wonde in sy nek spuit. Voldemort swiep by die vertrek uit sonder om terug te kyk en die groot adder sweef agter hom aan in haar yslike, beskermende sfeer.

Terug in die tonnel en sy eie kop, maak Harry sy oë oop: daar loop bloed uit sy kneukels wat hy stukkend gebyt het sodat hy nie moes gil van pyn nie. Nou loer hy deur die klein krakie tussen die krat en die muur en kyk hoe 'n voet in 'n swart stewel op die vloer ruk.

"Harry!" fluister Hermione agter hom, maar hy het sy towerstaf reeds gerig op die krat wat sy uitsig versper. Dit lig 'n duim in die lug op en dryf dan stil eenkant toe. So saggies as wat hy kan, trek hy homself in die vertrek op.

Hy weet nie hoekom hy dit doen nie, hoekom hy na die sterwende man toe gaan nie: hy weet nie wat hy voel toe hy sien hoe wit Snape se gesig is en hoe sy vingers die bloeiende wond aan sy nek probeer toedruk nie. Harry haal die Onsigbaarheidsmantel af en kyk af na die man wat hy haat, wie se swart oë groter word toe hy Harry sien en met hom probeer praat. Harry buig oor hom af; Snape gryp die voorkant van sy kleed en trek hom nader.

'n Aaklige, rasperige, roggelende geluid kom uit Snape se keel.

"Vat . . . dit . . . Vat . . . dit . . ."

Iets meer as bloed lek nou uit Snape uit. 'n Silwerige blou stof, nie gas of vloeistof nie, stroom by sy mond en sy ore en sy oë uit, en Harry weet wat dit is, maar weet nie wat om te doen nie –

Hermione druk 'n flessie wat uit die niet opgetower is in sy bewende hande. Harry laat die silwerige stof met sy towerstaf daarin loop. Toe die flessie tot oorlopens toe vol is en dit lyk of daar niks

meer bloed in Snape oor is nie, verslap sy greep op Harry se kleed.
"Kyk . . . na . . . my . . ." fluister hy.
Die groen oë vind die swartes, maar ná 'n sekonde is dit asof iets uit die dieptes van die donkeres verdwyn en hulle strak, uitdrukkingloos en leeg laat. Die hand wat Harry vashou, plof op die vloer neer en Snape beweeg nie meer nie.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



THE PRINCE'S TALE

Harry remained kneeling at Snape's side, simply staring down at him, until quite suddenly a high, cold voice spoke so close to them that Harry jumped to his feet, the flask gripped tightly in his hands, thinking that Voldemort had reentered the room.

Voldemort's voice reverberated from the walls and floor, and Harry realized that he was talking to Hogwarts and to all the surrounding area, that the residents of Hogsmeade and all those still fighting in the castle would hear him as clearly as if he stood beside them, his breath on the back of their necks, a deathblow away.

"You have fought," said the high, cold voice, "valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery.

"Yet you have sustained heavy losses. If you continue to resist me,

you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste.

"Lord Voldemort is merciful. I command my forces to retreat immediately.

"You have one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured.

"I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then battle recommences. This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Harry Potter, and I shall find you, and I shall punish every last man, woman, and child who has tried to conceal you from me. One hour."

Both Ron and Hermione shook their heads frantically, looking at Harry.

"Don't listen to him," said Ron.

"It'll be all right," said Hermione wildly. "Let's — let's get back to the castle, if he's gone to the forest we'll need to think of a new plan —"

She glanced at Snape's body, then hurried back to the tunnel entrance. Ron followed her. Harry gathered up the Invisibility Cloak, then looked down at Snape. He did not know what to feel, except shock at the way Snape had been killed, and the reason for which it had been done. . . .

They crawled back through the tunnel, none of them talking, and Harry wondered whether Ron and Hermione could still hear Voldemort ringing in their heads, as he could.

You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest . . . One hour. . . .

Small bundles seemed to litter the lawn at the front of the castle. It could only be an hour or so from dawn, yet it was pitch-black. The three of them hurried toward the stone steps. A lone clog, the size of a small boat, lay abandoned in front of them. There was no other sign of Grawp or of his attacker.

The castle was unnaturally silent. There were no flashes of light now, no bangs or screams or shouts. The flagstones of the deserted entrance hall were stained with blood. Emeralds were still scattered all over the floor, along with pieces of marble and splintered wood. Part of the banisters had been blown away.

"Where is everyone?" whispered Hermione.

Ron led the way to the Great Hall. Harry stopped in the doorway.

The House tables were gone and the room was crowded. The survivors stood in groups, their arms around each other's necks. The injured were being treated upon the raised platform by Madam Pomfrey and a group of helpers. Firenze was amongst the injured; his flank poured blood and he shook where he lay, unable to stand.

The dead lay in a row in the middle of the Hall. Harry could not see Fred's body, because his family surrounded him. George was kneeling at his head; Mrs. Weasley was lying across Fred's chest, her body shaking, Mr. Weasley stroking her hair while tears cascaded down his cheeks.

Without a word to Harry, Ron and Hermione walked away. Harry saw Hermione approach Ginny, whose face was swollen and blotchy,

and hug her. Ron joined Bill, Fleur, and Percy, who flung an arm around Ron's shoulders. As Ginny and Hermione moved closer to the rest of the family, Harry had a clear view of the bodies lying next to Fred: Remus and Tonks, pale and still and peaceful-looking, apparently asleep beneath the dark, enchanted ceiling.

The Great Hall seemed to fly away, become smaller, shrink, as Harry reeled backward from the doorway. He could not draw breath. He could not bear to look at any of the other bodies, to see who else had died for him. He could not bear to join the Weasleys, could not look into their eyes, when if he had given himself up in the first place, Fred might never have died. . . .

He turned away and ran up the marble staircase. Lupin, Tonks . . . He yearned not to feel . . . He wished he could rip out his heart, his innards, everything that was screaming inside him. . . .

The castle was completely empty; even the ghosts seemed to have joined the mass mourning in the Great Hall. Harry ran without stopping, clutching the crystal flask of Snape's last thoughts, and he did not slow down until he reached the stone gargoyle guarding the headmaster's office.

"Password?"

"Dumbledore!" said Harry without thinking, because it was he whom he yearned to see, and to his surprise the gargoyle slid aside, revealing the spiral staircase behind.

But when Harry burst into the circular office he found a change. The portraits that hung all around the walls were empty. Not a single headmaster or headmistress remained to see him; all, it seemed, had flitted away, charging through the paintings that lined the castle, so

that they could have a clear view of what was going on.

Harry glanced hopelessly at Dumbledore's deserted frame, which hung directly behind the headmaster's chair, then turned his back on it. The stone Pensieve lay in the cabinet where it had always been: Harry heaved it onto the desk and poured Snape's memories into the wide basin with its runic markings around the edge. To escape into someone else's head would be a blessed relief. . . . Nothing that even Snape had left him could be worse than his own thoughts. The memories swirled, silver white and strange, and without hesitating, with a feeling of reckless abandonment, as though this would assuage his torturing grief, Harry dived.

He fell headlong into sunlight, and his feet found warm ground. When he straightened up, he saw that he was in a nearly deserted playground. A single huge chimney dominated the distant skyline. Two girls were swinging backward and forward, and a skinny boy was watching them from behind a clump of bushes. His black hair was overlong and his clothes were so mismatched that it looked deliberate: too short jeans, a shabby, overlarge coat that might have belonged to a grown man, an odd smocklike shirt.

Harry moved closer to the boy. Snape looked no more than nine or ten years old, sallow, small, stringy. There was undisguised greed in his thin face as he watched the younger of the two girls swinging higher and higher than her sister.

"Lily, don't do it!" shrieked the elder of the two.

But the girl had let go of the swing at the very height of its arc and flown into the air, quite literally flown, launched herself skyward with a great shout of laughter, and instead of crumpling on the

playground asphalt, she soared like a trapeze artist through the air, staying up far too long, landing far too lightly.

"Mummy told you not to!"

Petunia stopped her swing by dragging the heels of her sandals on the ground, making a crunching, grinding sound, then leapt up, hands on hips.

"Mummy said you weren't allowed, Lily!"

"But I'm fine," said Lily, still giggling. "Tuney, look at this. Watch what I can do."

Petunia glanced around. The playground was deserted apart from themselves and, though the girls did not know it, Snape. Lily had picked up a fallen flower from the bush behind which Snape lurked. Petunia advanced, evidently torn between curiosity and disapproval. Lily waited until Petunia was near enough to have a clear view, then held out her palm. The flower sat there, opening and closing its petals, like some bizarre, many-lipped oyster.

"Stop it!" shrieked Petunia.

"It's not hurting you," said Lily, but she closed her hand on the blossom and threw it back to the ground.

"It's not right," said Petunia, but her eyes had followed the flower's flight to the ground and lingered upon it. "How do you do it?" she added, and there was definite longing in her voice.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Snape could no longer contain himself, but had jumped out from behind the bushes. Petunia shrieked and ran backward toward the swings, but Lily, though clearly startled, remained where she was. Snape seemed to regret his appearance. A dull flush of color mounted the sallow cheeks as he looked at Lily.

"What's obvious?" asked Lily.

Snape had an air of nervous excitement. With a glance at the distant Petunia, now hovering beside the swings, he lowered his voice and said, "I know what you are."

"What do you mean?"

"You're . . . you're a witch," whispered Snape.

She looked affronted.

"*That's* not a very nice thing to say to somebody!"

She turned, nose in the air, and marched off toward her sister.

"No!" said Snape. He was highly colored now, and Harry wondered why he did not take off the ridiculously large coat, unless it was because he did not want to reveal the smock beneath it. He flapped after the girls, looking ludicrously batlike, like his older self.

The sisters considered him, united in disapproval, both holding on to one of the swing poles as though it was the safe place in tag.

"You *are*," said Snape to Lily. "You *are* a witch. I've been watching you for a while. But there's nothing wrong with that. My mum's one, and I'm a wizard."

Petunia's laugh was like cold water.

"Wizard!" she shrieked, her courage returned now that she had recovered from the shock of his unexpected appearance. "*I* know who *you* are. You're that Snape boy! They live down Spinner's End by the river," she told Lily, and it was evident from her tone that she considered the address a poor recommendation. "Why have you been spying on us?"

"Haven't been spying," said Snape, hot and uncomfortable and dirty-haired in the bright sunlight. "Wouldn't spy on *you*, anyway," he

added spitefully, "*you're* a Muggle."

Though Petunia evidently did not understand the word, she could hardly mistake the tone.

"Lily, come on, we're leaving!" she said shrilly. Lily obeyed her sister at once, glaring at Snape as she left. He stood watching them as they marched through the playground gate, and Harry, the only one left to observe him, recognized Snape's bitter disappointment, and understood that Snape had been planning this moment for a while, and that it had all gone wrong. . . .

The scene dissolved, and before Harry knew it, re-formed around him. He was now in a small thicket of trees. He could see a sunlit river glittering through their trunks. The shadows cast by the trees made a basin of cool green shade. Two children sat facing each other, cross-legged on the ground. Snape had removed his coat now; his odd smock looked less peculiar in the half light.

". . . and the Ministry can punish you if you do magic outside school, you get letters."

"But I *have* done magic outside school!"

"We're all right. We haven't got wands yet. They let you off when you're a kid and you can't help it. But once you're eleven," he nodded importantly, "and they start training you, then you've got to go careful."

There was a little silence. Lily had picked up a fallen twig and twirled it in the air, and Harry knew that she was imagining sparks trailing from it. Then she dropped the twig, leaned in toward the boy, and said, "It *is* real, isn't it? It's not a joke? Petunia says you're lying to me. Petunia says there isn't a Hogwarts. It *is* real, isn't it?"

"It's real for us," said Snape. "Not for her. But we'll get the letter, you and me."

"Really?" whispered Lily.

"Definitely," said Snape, and even with his poorly cut hair and his odd clothes, he struck an oddly impressive figure sprawled in front of her, brimful of confidence in his destiny.

"And will it really come by owl?" Lily whispered.

"Normally," said Snape. "But you're Muggle-born, so someone from the school will have to come and explain to your parents."

"Does it make a difference, being Muggle-born?"

Snape hesitated. His black eyes, eager in the greenish gloom, moved over the pale face, the dark red hair.

"No," he said. "It doesn't make any difference."

"Good," said Lily, relaxing: It was clear that she had been worrying.

"You've got loads of magic," said Snape. "I saw that. All the time I was watching you . . ."

His voice trailed away; she was not listening, but had stretched out on the leafy ground and was looking up at the canopy of leaves overhead. He watched her as greedily as he had watched her in the playground.

"How are things at your house?" Lily asked.

A little crease appeared between his eyes.

"Fine," he said.

"They're not arguing anymore?"

"Oh yes, they're arguing," said Snape. He picked up a fistful of

leaves and began tearing them apart, apparently unaware of what he was doing. "But it won't be that long and I'll be gone."

"Doesn't your dad like magic?"

"He doesn't like anything, much," said Snape.

"Severus?"

A little smile twisted Snape's mouth when she said his name.

"Yeah?"

"Tell me about the dementors again."

"What d'you want to know about them for?"

"If I use magic outside school —"

"They wouldn't give you to the dementors for that! Dementors are for people who do really bad stuff. They guard the wizard prison, Azkaban. You're not going to end up in Azkaban, you're too —"

He turned red again and shredded more leaves. Then a small rustling noise behind Harry made him turn: Petunia, hiding behind a tree, had lost her footing.

"Tuney!" said Lily, surprise and welcome in her voice, but Snape had jumped to his feet.

"Who's spying now?" he shouted. "What d'you want?"

Petunia was breathless, alarmed at being caught. Harry could see her struggling for something hurtful to say.

"What is that you're wearing, anyway?" she said, pointing at Snape's chest. "Your mum's blouse?"

There was a *crack*: A branch over Petunia's head had fallen. Lily screamed: The branch caught Petunia on the shoulder, and she staggered backward and burst into tears.

"Tuney!"

But Petunia was running away. Lily rounded on Snape.

"Did you make that happen?"

"No." He looked both defiant and scared.

"You did!" She was backing away from him. "You *did*! You hurt her!"

"No — no I didn't!"

But the lie did not convince Lily: After one last burning look, she ran from the little thicket, off after her sister, and Snape looked miserable and confused. . . .

And the scene re-formed. Harry looked around: He was on platform nine and three-quarters, and Snape stood beside him, slightly hunched, next to a thin, sallow-faced, sour-looking woman who greatly resembled him. Snape was staring at a family of four a short distance away. The two girls stood a little apart from their parents. Lily seemed to be pleading with her sister; Harry moved closer to listen.

". . . I'm sorry, Tuney, I'm sorry! Listen —" She caught her sister's hand and held tight to it, even though Petunia tried to pull it away. "Maybe once I'm there — no, listen, Tuney! Maybe once I'm there, I'll be able to go to Professor Dumbledore and persuade him to change his mind!"

"I don't — want — to — go!" said Petunia, and she dragged her hand back out of her sister's grasp. "You think I want to go to some stupid castle and learn to be a — a —"

Her pale eyes roved over the platform, over the cats mewling in their owners' arms, over the owls fluttering and hooting at each other

in cages, over the students, some already in their long black robes, loading trunks onto the scarlet steam engine or else greeting one another with glad cries after a summer apart.

"— you think I want to be a — a freak?"

Lily's eyes filled with tears as Petunia succeeded in tugging her hand away.

"I'm not a freak," said Lily. "That's a horrible thing to say."

"That's where you're going," said Petunia with relish. "A special school for freaks. You and that Snape boy . . . weirdos, that's what you two are. It's good you're being separated from normal people. It's for our safety."

Lily glanced toward her parents, who were looking around the platform with an air of wholehearted enjoyment, drinking in the scene. Then she looked back at her sister, and her voice was low and fierce.

"You didn't think it was such a freak's school when you wrote to the headmaster and begged him to take you."

Petunia turned scarlet.

"Beg? I didn't beg!"

"I saw his reply. It was very kind."

"You shouldn't have read —" whispered Petunia, "that was my private — how could you — ?"

Lily gave herself away by half-glancing toward where Snape stood nearby. Petunia gasped.

"That boy found it! You and that boy have been sneaking in my room!"

"No — not sneaking —" Now Lily was on the defensive. "Severus

saw the envelope, and he couldn't believe a Muggle could have contacted Hogwarts, that's all! He says there must be wizards working undercover in the postal service who take care of —"

"Apparently wizards poke their noses in everywhere!" said Petunia, now as pale as she had been flushed. *"Freak!"* she spat at her sister, and she flounced off to where her parents stood. . . .

The scene dissolved again. Snape was hurrying along the corridor of the Hogwarts Express as it clattered through the countryside. He had already changed into his school robes, had perhaps taken the first opportunity to take off his dreadful Muggle clothes. At last he stopped, outside a compartment in which a group of rowdy boys were talking. Hunched in a corner seat beside the window was Lily, her face pressed against the windowpane.

Snape slid open the compartment door and sat down opposite Lily. She glanced at him and then looked back out of the window. She had been crying.

"I don't want to talk to you," she said in a constricted voice.

"Why not?"

"Tuney h-hates me. Because we saw that letter from Dumbledore."

"So what?"

She threw him a look of deep dislike.

"So she's my sister!"

"She's only a —" He caught himself quickly; Lily, too busy trying to wipe her eyes without being noticed, did not hear him.

"But we're going!" he said, unable to suppress the exhilaration in his voice. "This is it! We're off to Hogwarts!"

She nodded, mopping her eyes, but in spite of herself, she half

smiled.

"You'd better be in Slytherin," said Snape, encouraged that she had brightened a little.

"Slytherin?"

One of the boys sharing the compartment, who had shown no interest at all in Lily or Snape until that point, looked around at the word, and Harry, whose attention had been focused entirely on the two beside the window, saw his father: slight, black-haired like Snape, but with that indefinable air of having been well-cared-for, even adored, that Snape so conspicuously lacked.

"Who wants to be in Slytherin? I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?" James asked the boy lounging on the seats opposite him, and with a jolt, Harry realized that it was Sirius. Sirius did not smile.

"My whole family have been in Slytherin," he said.

"Blimey," said James, "and I thought you seemed all right!"

Sirius grinned.

"Maybe I'll break the tradition. Where are you heading, if you've got the choice?"

James lifted an invisible sword.

"'Gryffindor, where dwell the brave at heart!' Like my dad."

Snape made a small, disparaging noise. James turned on him.

"Got a problem with that?"

"No," said Snape, though his slight sneer said otherwise. "If you'd rather be brawny than brainy —"

"Where're you hoping to go, seeing as you're neither?" interjected Sirius.

James roared with laughter. Lily sat up, rather flushed, and looked from James to Sirius in dislike.

"Come on, Severus, let's find another compartment."

"Oooooo . . ."

James and Sirius imitated her lofty voice; James tried to trip Snape as he passed.

"See ya, Snivellus!" a voice called, as the compartment door slammed. . . .

And the scene dissolved once more. . . .

Harry was standing right behind Snape as they faced the candlelit House tables, lined with rapt faces. Then Professor McGonagall said, "Evans, Lily!"

He watched his mother walk forward on trembling legs and sit down upon the rickety stool. Professor McGonagall dropped the Sorting Hat onto her head, and barely a second after it had touched the dark red hair, the hat cried, *"Gryffindor!"*

Harry heard Snape let out a tiny groan. Lily took off the hat, handed it back to Professor McGonagall, then hurried toward the cheering Gryffindors, but as she went she glanced back at Snape, and there was a sad little smile on her face. Harry saw Sirius move up the bench to make room for her. She took one look at him, seemed to recognize him from the train, folded her arms, and firmly turned her back on him.

The roll call continued. Harry watched Lupin, Pettigrew, and his father join Lily and Sirius at the Gryffindor table. At last, when only a dozen students remained to be sorted, Professor McGonagall called Snape.

Harry walked with him to the stool, watched him place the hat upon his head. *"Slytherin!"* cried the Sorting Hat.

And Severus Snape moved off to the other side of the Hall, away from Lily, to where the Slytherins were cheering him, to where Lucius Malfoy, a prefect badge gleaming upon his chest, patted Snape on the back as he sat down beside him. . . .

And the scene changed. . . .

Lily and Snape were walking across the castle courtyard, evidently arguing. Harry hurried to catch up with them, to listen in. As he reached them, he realized how much taller they both were: A few years seemed to have passed since their Sorting.

". . . thought we were supposed to be friends?" Snape was saying. "Best friends?"

"We *are,* Sev, but I don't like some of the people you're hanging round with! I'm sorry, but I detest Avery and Mulciber! *Mulciber!* What do you see in him, Sev, he's creepy! D'you know what he tried to do to Mary Macdonald the other day?"

Lily had reached a pillar and leaned against it, looking up into the thin, sallow face.

"That was nothing," said Snape. "It was a laugh, that's all —"

"It was Dark Magic, and if you think that's funny —"

"What about the stuff Potter and his mates get up to?" demanded Snape. His color rose again as he said it, unable, it seemed, to hold in his resentment.

"What's Potter got to do with anything?" said Lily.

"They sneak out at night. There's something weird about that Lupin. Where does he keep going?"

"He's ill," said Lily. "They say he's ill —"

"Every month at the full moon?" said Snape.

"I know your theory," said Lily, and she sounded cold. "Why are you so obsessed with them anyway? Why do you care what they're doing at night?"

"I'm just trying to show you they're not as wonderful as everyone seems to think they are."

The intensity of his gaze made her blush.

"They don't use Dark Magic, though." She dropped her voice. "And you're being really ungrateful. I heard what happened the other night. You went sneaking down that tunnel by the Whomping Willow, and James Potter saved you from whatever's down there —"

Snape's whole face contorted and he spluttered, "Saved? Saved? You think he was playing the hero? He was saving his neck and his friends' too! You're not going to — I won't let you —"

"*Let* me? *Let* me?"

Lily's bright green eyes were slits. Snape backtracked at once.

"I didn't mean — I just don't want to see you made a fool of — He fancies you, James Potter fancies you!" The words seemed wrenched from him against his will. "And he's not . . . everyone thinks . . . big Quidditch hero —" Snape's bitterness and dislike were rendering him incoherent, and Lily's eyebrows were traveling farther and farther up her forehead.

"I know James Potter's an arrogant toerag," she said, cutting across Snape. "I don't need you to tell me that. But Mulciber's and Avery's idea of humor is just evil. *Evil*, Sev. I don't understand how you can be friends with them."

Harry doubted that Snape had even heard her strictures on Mulciber and Avery. The moment she had insulted James Potter, his whole body had relaxed, and as they walked away there was a new spring in Snape's step. . . .

And the scene dissolved. . . .

Harry watched again as Snape left the Great Hall after sitting his O.W.L. in Defense Against the Dark Arts, watched as he wandered away from the castle and strayed inadvertently close to the place beneath the beech tree where James, Sirius, Lupin, and Pettigrew sat together. But Harry kept his distance this time, because he knew what happened after James had hoisted Severus into the air and taunted him; he knew what had been done and said, and it gave him no pleasure to hear it again . . . He watched as Lily joined the group and went to Snape's defense. Distantly he heard Snape shout at her in his humiliation and his fury, the unforgivable word: *"Mudblood."*

The scene changed. . . .

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not interested."

"I'm sorry!"

"Save your breath."

It was nighttime. Lily, who was wearing a dressing gown, stood with her arms folded in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady, at the entrance to Gryffindor Tower.

"I only came out because Mary told me you were threatening to sleep here."

"I was. I would have done. I never meant to call you Mudblood, it just —"

"Slipped out?" There was no pity in Lily's voice. "It's too late. I've made excuses for you for years. None of my friends can understand why I even talk to you. You and your precious little Death Eater friends — you see, you don't even deny it! You don't even deny that's what you're all aiming to be! You can't wait to join You-Know-Who, can you?"

He opened his mouth, but closed it without speaking.

"I can't pretend anymore. You've chosen your way, I've chosen mine."

"No — listen, I didn't mean —"

"— to call me Mudblood? But you call everyone of my birth Mudblood, Severus. Why should I be any different?"

He struggled on the verge of speech, but with a contemptuous look she turned and climbed back through the portrait hole. . . .

The corridor dissolved, and the scene took a little longer to re-form: Harry seemed to fly through shifting shapes and colors until his surroundings solidified again and he stood on a hilltop, forlorn and cold in the darkness, the wind whistling through the branches of a few leafless trees. The adult Snape was panting, turning on the spot, his wand gripped tightly in his hand, waiting for something or for someone . . . His fear infected Harry too, even though he knew that he could not be harmed, and he looked over his shoulder, wondering what it was that Snape was waiting for —

Then a blinding, jagged jet of white light flew through the air: Harry thought of lightning, but Snape had dropped to his knees and his wand had flown out of his hand.

"Don't kill me!"

"That was not my intention."

Any sound of Dumbledore Apparating had been drowned by the sound of the wind in the branches. He stood before Snape with his robes whipping around him, and his face was illuminated from below in the light cast by his wand.

"Well, Severus? What message does Lord Voldemort have for me?"

"No — no message — I'm here on my own account!"

Snape was wringing his hands: He looked a little mad, with his straggling black hair flying around him.

"I — I come with a warning — no, a request — please —"

Dumbledore flicked his wand. Though leaves and branches still flew through the night air around them, silence fell on the spot where he and Snape faced each other.

"What request could a Death Eater make of me?"

"The — the prophecy . . . the prediction . . . Trelawney . . ."

"Ah, yes," said Dumbledore. "How much did you relay to Lord Voldemort?"

"Everything — everything I heard!" said Snape. "That is why — it is for that reason — he thinks it means Lily Evans!"

"The prophecy did not refer to a woman," said Dumbledore. "It spoke of a boy born at the end of July —"

"You know what I mean! He thinks it means her son, he is going to hunt her down — kill them all —"

"If she means so much to you," said Dumbledore, "surely Lord Voldemort will spare her? Could you not ask for mercy for the mother, in exchange for the son?"

"I have — I have asked him —"

"You disgust me," said Dumbledore, and Harry had never heard so much contempt in his voice. Snape seemed to shrink a little. "You do not care, then, about the deaths of her husband and child? They can die, as long as you have what you want?"

Snape said nothing, but merely looked up at Dumbledore.

"Hide them all, then," he croaked. "Keep her — them — safe. Please."

"And what will you give me in return, Severus?"

"In — in return?" Snape gaped at Dumbledore, and Harry expected him to protest, but after a long moment he said, "Anything."

The hilltop faded, and Harry stood in Dumbledore's office, and something was making a terrible sound, like a wounded animal. Snape was slumped forward in a chair and Dumbledore was standing over him, looking grim. After a moment or two, Snape raised his face, and he looked like a man who had lived a hundred years of misery since leaving the wild hilltop.

"I thought . . . you were going . . . to keep her . . . safe. . . ."

"She and James put their faith in the wrong person," said Dumbledore. "Rather like you, Severus. Weren't you hoping that Lord Voldemort would spare her?"

Snape's breathing was shallow.

"Her boy survives," said Dumbledore.

With a tiny jerk of the head, Snape seemed to flick off an irksome fly.

"Her son lives. He has her eyes, precisely her eyes. You remember the shape and color of Lily Evans's eyes, I am sure?"

"DON'T!" bellowed Snape. "Gone . . . dead . . ."

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

"I wish . . . I wish *I* were dead. . . ."

"And what use would that be to anyone?" said Dumbledore coldly. "If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear."

Snape seemed to peer through a haze of pain, and Dumbledore's words appeared to take a long time to reach him.

"What — what do you mean?"

"You know how and why she died. Make sure it was not in vain. Help me protect Lily's son."

"He does not need protection. The Dark Lord has gone —"

"The Dark Lord will return, and Harry Potter will be in terrible danger when he does."

There was a long pause, and slowly Snape regained control of himself, mastered his own breathing. At last he said, "Very well. Very well. But never — never tell, Dumbledore! This must be between us! Swear it! I cannot bear . . . especially Potter's son . . . I want your word!"

"My word, Severus, that I shall never reveal the best of you?" Dumbledore sighed, looking down into Snape's ferocious, anguished face. "If you insist . . ."

The office dissolved but re-formed instantly. Snape was pacing up and down in front of Dumbledore.

"— mediocre, arrogant as his father, a determined rule-breaker, delighted to find himself famous, attention-seeking and impertinent —"

"You see what you expect to see, Severus," said Dumbledore, without raising his eyes from a copy of *Transfiguration Today*. "Other teachers report that the boy is modest, likable, and reasonably talented. Personally, I find him an engaging child."

Dumbledore turned a page, and said, without looking up, "Keep an eye on Quirrell, won't you?"

A whirl of color, and now everything darkened, and Snape and Dumbledore stood a little apart in the entrance hall, while the last stragglers from the Yule Ball passed them on their way to bed.

"Well?" murmured Dumbledore.

"Karkaroff's Mark is becoming darker too. He is panicking, he fears retribution; you know how much help he gave the Ministry after the Dark Lord fell." Snape looked sideways at Dumbledore's crooked-nosed profile. "Karkaroff intends to flee if the Mark burns."

"Does he?" said Dumbledore softly, as Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies came giggling in from the grounds. "And are you tempted to join him?"

"No," said Snape, his black eyes on Fleur's and Roger's retreating figures. "I am not such a coward."

"No," agreed Dumbledore. "You are a braver man by far than Igor Karkaroff. You know, I sometimes think we Sort too soon. . . ."

He walked away, leaving Snape looking stricken. . . .

And now Harry stood in the headmaster's office yet again. It was nighttime, and Dumbledore sagged sideways in the thronelike chair behind the desk, apparently semiconscious. His right hand dangled over the side, blackened and burned. Snape was muttering incantations, pointing his wand at the wrist of the hand, while with

his left hand he tipped a goblet full of thick golden potion down Dumbledore's throat. After a moment or two, Dumbledore's eyelids fluttered and opened.

"Why," said Snape, without preamble, "*why* did you put on that ring? It carries a curse, surely you realized that. Why even touch it?"

Marvolo Gaunt's ring lay on the desk before Dumbledore. It was cracked; the sword of Gryffindor lay beside it.

Dumbledore grimaced.

"I . . . was a fool. Sorely tempted . . ."

"Tempted by what?"

Dumbledore did not answer.

"It is a miracle you managed to return here!" Snape sounded furious. "That ring carried a curse of extraordinary power, to contain it is all we can hope for; I have trapped the curse in one hand for the time being —"

Dumbledore raised his blackened, useless hand, and examined it with the expression of one being shown an interesting curio.

"You have done very well, Severus. How long do you think I have?"

Dumbledore's tone was conversational; he might have been asking for a weather forecast. Snape hesitated, and then said, "I cannot tell. Maybe a year. There is no halting such a spell forever. It will spread eventually, it is the sort of curse that strengthens over time."

Dumbledore smiled. The news that he had less than a year to live seemed a matter of little or no concern to him.

"I am fortunate, extremely fortunate, that I have you, Severus."

"If you had only summoned me a little earlier, I might have been

able to do more, buy you more time!" said Snape furiously. He looked down at the broken ring and the sword. "Did you think that breaking the ring would break the curse?"

"Something like that . . . I was delirious, no doubt . . . ." said Dumbledore. With an effort he straightened himself in his chair. "Well, really, this makes matters much more straightforward."

Snape looked utterly perplexed. Dumbledore smiled.

"I refer to the plan Lord Voldemort is revolving around me. His plan to have the poor Malfoy boy murder me."

Snape sat down in the chair Harry had so often occupied, across the desk from Dumbledore. Harry could tell that he wanted to say more on the subject of Dumbledore's cursed hand, but the other held it up in polite refusal to discuss the matter further. Scowling, Snape said, "The Dark Lord does not expect Draco to succeed. This is merely punishment for Lucius's recent failures. Slow torture for Draco's parents, while they watch him fail and pay the price."

"In short, the boy has had a death sentence pronounced upon him as surely as I have," said Dumbledore. "Now, I should have thought the natural successor to the job, once Draco fails, is yourself?"

There was a short pause.

"That, I think, is the Dark Lord's plan."

"Lord Voldemort foresees a moment in the near future when he will not need a spy at Hogwarts?"

"He believes the school will soon be in his grasp, yes."

"And if it does fall into his grasp," said Dumbledore, almost, it seemed, as an aside, "I have your word that you will do all in your power to protect the students of Hogwarts?"

Snape gave a stiff nod.

"Good. Now then. Your first priority will be to discover what Draco is up to. A frightened teenage boy is a danger to others as well as to himself. Offer him help and guidance, he ought to accept, he likes you —"

"— much less since his father has lost favor. Draco blames me, he thinks I have usurped Lucius's position."

"All the same, try. I am concerned less for myself than for accidental victims of whatever schemes might occur to the boy. Ultimately, of course, there is only one thing to be done if we are to save him from Lord Voldemort's wrath."

Snape raised his eyebrows and his tone was sardonic as he asked, "Are you intending to let him kill you?"

"Certainly not. *You* must kill me."

There was a long silence, broken only by an odd clicking noise. Fawkes the phoenix was gnawing a bit of cuttlebone.

"Would you like me to do it now?" asked Snape, his voice heavy with irony. "Or would you like a few moments to compose an epitaph?"

"Oh, not quite yet," said Dumbledore, smiling. "I daresay the moment will present itself in due course. Given what has happened tonight," he indicated his withered hand, "we can be sure that it will happen within a year."

"If you don't mind dying," said Snape roughly, "why not let Draco do it?"

"That boy's soul is not yet so damaged," said Dumbledore. "I would not have it ripped apart on my account."

“And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?”

“You alone know whether it will harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation,” said Dumbledore. “I ask this one great favor of you, Severus, because death is coming for me as surely as the Chudley Cannons will finish bottom of this year’s league. I confess I should prefer a quick, painless exit to the protracted and messy affair it will be if, for instance, Greyback is involved — I hear Voldemort has recruited him? Or dear Bellatrix, who likes to play with her food before she eats it.”

His tone was light, but his blue eyes pierced Snape as they had frequently pierced Harry, as though the soul they discussed was visible to him. At last Snape gave another curt nod.

Dumbledore seemed satisfied.

“Thank you, Severus . . .”

The office disappeared, and now Snape and Dumbledore were strolling together in the deserted castle grounds by twilight.

“What are you doing with Potter, all these evenings you are closeted together?” Snape asked abruptly.

Dumbledore looked weary.

“Why? You aren’t trying to give him *more* detentions, Severus? The boy will soon have spent more time in detention than out.”

“He is his father over again —”

“In looks, perhaps, but his deepest nature is much more like his mother’s. I spend time with Harry because I have things to discuss with him, information I must give him before it is too late.”

“Information,” repeated Snape. “You trust him . . . you do not trust me.”

"It is not a question of trust. I have, as we both know, limited time. It is essential that I give the boy enough information for him to do what he needs to do."

"And why may I not have the same information?"

"I prefer not to put all of my secrets in one basket, particularly not a basket that spends so much time dangling on the arm of Lord Voldemort."

"Which I do on your orders!"

"And you do it extremely well. Do not think that I underestimate the constant danger in which you place yourself, Severus. To give Voldemort what appears to be valuable information while withholding the essentials is a job I would entrust to nobody but you."

"Yet you confide much more in a boy who is incapable of Occlumency, whose magic is mediocre, and who has a direct connection into the Dark Lord's mind!"

"Voldemort fears that connection," said Dumbledore. "Not so long ago he had one small taste of what truly sharing Harry's mind means to him. It was pain such as he has never experienced. He will not try to possess Harry again, I am sure of it. Not in that way."

"I don't understand."

"Lord Voldemort's soul, maimed as it is, cannot bear close contact with a soul like Harry's. Like a tongue on frozen steel, like flesh in flame —"

"Souls? We were talking of minds!"

"In the case of Harry and Lord Voldemort, to speak of one is to speak of the other."

Dumbledore glanced around to make sure that they were alone. They were close by the Forbidden Forest now, but there was no sign of anyone near them.

"After you have killed me, Severus —"

"You refuse to tell me everything, yet you expect that small service of me!" snarled Snape, and real anger flared in the thin face now. "You take a great deal for granted, Dumbledore! Perhaps I have changed my mind!"

"You gave me your word, Severus. And while we are talking about services you owe me, I thought you agreed to keep a close eye on our young Slytherin friend?"

Snape looked angry, mutinous. Dumbledore sighed.

"Come to my office tonight, Severus, at eleven, and you shall not complain that I have no confidence in you. . . ."

They were back in Dumbledore's office, the windows dark, and Fawkes sat silent as Snape sat quite still, as Dumbledore walked around him, talking.

"Harry must not know, not until the last moment, not until it is necessary, otherwise how could he have the strength to do what must be done?"

"But what must he do?"

"That is between Harry and me. Now listen closely, Severus. There will come a time — after my death — do not argue, do not interrupt! There will come a time when Lord Voldemort will seem to fear for the life of his snake."

"For Nagini?" Snape looked astonished.

"Precisely. If there comes a time when Lord Voldemort stops

sending that snake forth to do his bidding, but keeps it safe beside him under magical protection, then, I think, it will be safe to tell Harry."

"Tell him what?"

Dumbledore took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

"Tell him that on the night Lord Voldemort tried to kill him, when Lily cast her own life between them as a shield, the Killing Curse rebounded upon Lord Voldemort, and a fragment of Voldemort's soul was blasted apart from the whole, and latched itself onto the only living soul left in that collapsing building. Part of Lord Voldemort lives inside Harry, and it is that which gives him the power of speech with snakes, and a connection with Lord Voldemort's mind that he has never understood. And while that fragment of soul, unmissed by Voldemort, remains attached to and protected by Harry, Lord Voldemort cannot die."

Harry seemed to be watching the two men from one end of a long tunnel, they were so far away from him, their voices echoing strangely in his ears.

"So the boy . . . the boy must die?" asked Snape quite calmly.

"And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus. That is essential."

Another long silence. Then Snape said, "I thought . . . all these years . . . that we were protecting him for her. For Lily."

"We have protected him because it has been essential to teach him, to raise him, to let him try his strength," said Dumbledore, his eyes still tight shut. "Meanwhile, the connection between them grows ever stronger, a parasitic growth: Sometimes I have thought he suspects it himself. If I know him, he will have arranged matters so that when he

does set out to meet his death, it will truly mean the end of Voldemort."

Dumbledore opened his eyes. Snape looked horrified.

"You have kept him alive so that he can die at the right moment?"

"Don't be shocked, Severus. How many men and women have you watched die?"

"Lately, only those whom I could not save," said Snape. He stood up. "You have used me."

"Meaning?"

"I have spied for you and lied for you, put myself in mortal danger for you. Everything was supposed to be to keep Lily Potter's son safe. Now you tell me you have been raising him like a pig for slaughter —"

"But this is touching, Severus," said Dumbledore seriously. "Have you grown to care for the boy, after all?"

"For *him*?" shouted Snape. *"Expecto Patronum!"*

From the tip of his wand burst the silver doe: She landed on the office floor, bounded once across the office, and soared out of the window. Dumbledore watched her fly away, and as her silvery glow faded he turned back to Snape, and his eyes were full of tears.

"After all this time?"

"Always," said Snape.

And the scene shifted. Now, Harry saw Snape talking to the portrait of Dumbledore behind his desk.

"You will have to give Voldemort the correct date of Harry's departure from his aunt and uncle's," said Dumbledore. "Not to do so will raise suspicion, when Voldemort believes you so well informed.

However, you must plant the idea of decoys; that, I think, ought to ensure Harry's safety. Try Confunding Mundungus Fletcher. And Severus, if you are forced to take part in the chase, be sure to act your part convincingly . . . I am counting upon you to remain in Lord Voldemort's good books as long as possible, or Hogwarts will be left to the mercy of the Carrows. . . ."

Now Snape was head to head with Mundungus in an unfamiliar tavern, Mundungus's face looking curiously blank, Snape frowning in concentration.

"You will suggest to the Order of the Phoenix," Snape murmured, "that they use decoys. Polyjuice Potion. Identical Potters. It is the only thing that might work. You will forget that I have suggested this. You will present it as your own idea. You understand?"

"I understand," murmured Mundungus, his eyes unfocused. . . .

Now Harry was flying alongside Snape on a broomstick through a clear dark night: He was accompanied by other hooded Death Eaters, and ahead were Lupin and a Harry who was really George. . . . A Death Eater moved ahead of Snape and raised his wand, pointing it directly at Lupin's back —

"Sectumsempra!" shouted Snape.

But the spell, intended for the Death Eater's wand hand, missed and hit George instead —

And next, Snape was kneeling in Sirius's old bedroom. Tears were dripping from the end of his hooked nose as he read the old letter from Lily. The second page carried only a few words:

could ever have been friends with Gellert Grindelwald. I think

her mind's going, personally!

Lots of love,



Snape took the page bearing Lily's signature, and her love, and tucked it inside his robes. Then he ripped in two the photograph he was also holding, so that he kept the part from which Lily laughed, throwing the portion showing James and Harry back onto the floor, under the chest of drawers. . . .

And now Snape stood again in the headmaster's study as Phineas Nigellus came hurrying into his portrait.

"Headmaster! They are camping in the Forest of Dean! The Mudblood —"

"Do not use that word!"

"— the Granger girl, then, mentioned the place as she opened her bag and I heard her!"

"Good. Very good!" cried the portrait of Dumbledore behind the headmaster's chair. "Now, Severus, the sword! Do not forget that it must be taken under conditions of need and valor — and he must not know that you give it! If Voldemort should read Harry's mind and see you acting for him —"

"I know," said Snape curtly. He approached the portrait of Dumbledore and pulled at its side. It swung forward, revealing a hidden cavity behind it from which he took the sword of Gryffindor.

"And you still aren't going to tell me why it's so important to give Potter the sword?" said Snape as he swung a traveling cloak over his

robes.

"No, I don't think so," said Dumbledore's portrait. "He will know what to do with it. And Severus, be very careful, they may not take kindly to your appearance after George Weasley's mishap —"

Snape turned at the door.

"Don't worry, Dumbledore," he said coolly. "I have a plan. . . ."

And Snape left the room. Harry rose up out of the Pensieve, and moments later he lay on the carpeted floor in exactly the same room: Snape might just have closed the door.

— HOOFSTUK DRIE-EN-DERTIG —

Die Prins se Verhaal

Harry bly langs Snape kniel en staar maar net af na hom totdat daar skielik 'n hoë, helder stem so naby hulle praat dat Harry opspring, die flessie styf in sy hande vasgeklem; hy dink Voldemort het weer by die vertrek ingekom.

Voldemort se stem weergalm van die mure en vloer af, en Harry besef hy praat met Hogwarts en met die hele omliggende gebied, en dat al Hogsmeade se inwoners en almal wat steeds in die kasteel veg hom so duidelik sal hoor asof hy by hulle staan met sy asem agter in hulle nekke, 'n doodslag ver.

"Julle het dapper geveg," sê die hoë, koue stem. "Die Heer Voldemort weet hoe om dapperheid na waarde te skat.

"Nogtans het julle swaar verliese gely. As julle aanhou om julle teen my te verset, gaan julle almal sterf, een vir een. Ek wil nie hê dit moet gebeur nie. Elke druppel towerbloed wat verspil word, is 'n verlies en 'n vermorsing.

"Die Heer Voldemort is genadig. Ek beveel my magte om onmiddellik terug te trek.

"Julle het een uur tyd. Verwyder julle dooies op 'n waardige wyse. Behandel julle beseerdes.

"Ek praat nou direk met jou, Harry Potter. Jy het toegelaat dat jou vriende vir jou sterf eerder as om my self te konfronteer. Ek sal 'n uur lank in die Verbode Woud wag. As jy aan die einde van die uur nog nie na my toe gekom het en jou oorgegee het nie, sal die geveg hervat word. Hierdie keer sal ek self tot die stryd toetree, Harry Potter, en ek sal jou vind, en ek sal elke enkele man, vrou en kind straf wat jou vir my probeer wegsteek het. Een uur."

Sowel Ron as Hermione skud hulle koppe koorsagtig terwyl hulle na Harry kyk.

"Moenie na hom luister nie," sê Ron.

"Dit sal oukei wees," sê Hermione wild. "Kom – kom ons gaan

terug kasteel toe, as hy in die Woud is, sal ons 'n nuwe plan moet uitdink –"

Sy kyk vlugtig na Snape se liggaam en haas haar dan terug na die tonnelingang. Ron volg haar. Harry tel die Onsigbaarheidsmantel op en kyk af na Snape. Hy weet nie wat om te voel nie, behalwe skok oor die manier waarop Snape vermoor is, en die rede hoekom dit gedoen is . . .

Hulle kruip terug deur die tonnel; nie een van hulle praat nie, en Harry wonder of Ron en Hermione ook soos hy Voldemort se stem nog in hulle koppe hoor weerklink.

Jy het toegelaat dat jou vriende vir jou sterf eerder as om my self te konfronteer. Ek sal 'n uur lank in die Verbode Woud wag . . . Een uur.

Klein bondeltjies lê soos rommel op die grasperk voor die kasteel. Dit is seker net 'n uur of so voor dagbreek, maar dit is nogtans pikdonker. Hulle drie nael na die kliptrap toe. 'n Enkele houtklomp, so groot soos 'n klein bootjie, lê verlate voor hulle. Daar is geen ander teken van Ghrop of sy aanvaller nie.

Die kasteel is onnatuurlik stil. Daar is nou geen ligflitse nie, geen knalle of geskree nie. Die verlate Ingangsportaal se plaveiklippe is vol bloedvlekke. Smaragde lê oral oor die vloer versprei, saam met stukkies marmer en houtsplinters. 'n Gedeelte van die trapreling is weggeskiet.

"Waar is almal?" fluister Hermione.

Ron loop eerste by die Groot Saal in. Harry steek op die drumpel vas.

Die huistafels is weg en die vertrek is stampvol. Die oorlewendes staan in groepies met hulle arms om mekaar se nekke. Die beseerdes word op die platform deur madame Pomfrey en 'n groep helpers verpleeg. Firenze is een van die beseerdes; daar stroom bloed uit sy sy en hy lê rukkend, nie in staat om te staan nie.

Die dooies lê in 'n ry in die middel van die Saal. Harry kan nie Fred se liggaam sien nie, want sy familie is om hom. George kniel by sy kop; mevrou Weasley lê oor Fred se borskas en haar lyf skud, meneer Weasley streel sy hare terwyl trane by sy wange afloop.

Sonder 'n woord aan Harry stap Ron en Hermione weg. Harry sien Hermione na Ginny toe loop, wie se gesig opgeswel en traanbevlek is, en omhels haar. Ron sluit aan by Bill, Fleur en Percy, wat 'n arm om Ron se skouers sit. Terwyl Ginny en Hermione nader aan die res van die familie beweeg, kan Harry duidelik sien watter liggame lê langs Fred: Remus en Tonks, bleek en stil en vreedsaam, skynbaar aan die slaap onder die donker, betowerde plafon.

Dit is asof die Groot Saal wegvlieg, kleiner word, krimp terwyl

Harry van die drumpel af terugsteier. Hy kan nie asem kry nie. Hy kan dit nie verdra om na enige van die ander liggame te kyk om te sien wie anders vir hom gesterf het nie. Hy kan nie by die Weasleys aansluit nie, kan hulle nie in die oë kyk nie, want as hy hom in die eerste instansie oorgegee het, sou Fred dalk nog gelewe het . . .

Hy draai om en hardloop by die marmertrap op. Lupin, Tonks . . . Hy hunker daarna om nie te voel nie . . . Hy wens hy kan sy hart uitruk, sy binnegoed, alles wat binne-in hom skreeu . . .

Die kasteel is heeltemal leeg; dit lyk of selfs die spoke by die massaroubeklag in die Groot Saal aangesluit het. Harry klem die kristalfles met Snape se laaste gedagtes vas en hardloop sonder om te stop; hy verslap sy pas eers toe hy by die klipdraakkop kom wat die skoolhoof se kantoor bewaak.

"Wagwoord?"

"Dumbledore!" sê Harry sonder om te dink, want hy smag daarna om hom te sien, en tot sy verbasing gly die draakkop eenkant toe en onthul die wenteltrap daaragter.

Maar toe Harry by die sirkelvormige kantoor instorm, lyk dit anders. Die portrette wat oral teen die mure gehang het, is leeg. Nie 'n enkele skoolhoof het oorgebly wat hom kan sien nie; hulle het hulle almal blykbaar uit die voete gemaak en met die portrette wat regdeur die kasteel hang langs gestorm om te kan sien wat aangaan.

Harry kyk wanhopig na Dumbledore se verlate raam wat direk bokant die skoolhoof se stoel hang en draai dan sy rug daarop. Die Peinssif van klip lê in die kabinet waar dit altyd was; Harry sit dit op die lessenaar neer en giet Snape se herinneringe uit in die breë kom met sy runetekens om die rand. Dit gaan 'n salige verligting wees om na iemand anders se kop te ontsnap . . . niks wat selfs Snape vir hom nagelaat het, kan erger as sy eie gedagtes wees nie. Die herinneringe warrel, silwerwit en vreemd, en sonder huiwering, met 'n gevoel van roekelose oorgawe, asof dit die marteling van sy verdriet sal verlig, duik Harry in.

Hy val kop eerste in sonlig en sy voete voel warm grond. Toe hy regop kom, sien Harry hy is by 'n bykans verlate speelgrond. 'n Enkele reuseskoorsteen domineer die stad se silhoeët in die verte. Twee meisies swaai heen en weer en 'n maer seun hou hulle van agter 'n klomp bosse dop. Sy swart hare is te lank en sy klere pas so sleg by mekaar dat dit opsetlik lyk: jeans wat te kort is, 'n verslonste, oorgroot jas wat aan 'n volwasse man kon behoort het en 'n vreemde hemp wat amper soos 'n oorbloes lyk.

Harry beweeg nader aan die seun. Snape lyk niks meer as nege of tien jaar oud nie; hy is 'n sieklike geel, klein en seningrig. Daar is

onverbloemde begeerte op sy skraal gesig terwyl hy kyk hoe die jonger een van die twee meisies hoër en hoër as haar suster swaai.

"Lily, moenie dit doen nie!" roep die ouer suster.

Maar die meisie het die swaai op die hoogste punt van sy opwaartse kurwe gelos en vlieg deur die lug, vlieg letterlik, en slinger haarself hemelwaarts terwyl sy skree van die lag, en in plaas daarvan dat sy op die speelgrond se teer neerstort, sweef sy soos 'n sweefstokarties deur die lug, bly gans te lank bo en land dan gans te ligvoets.

"Mamma het gesê jy moenie!"

Petunia stop haar swaai deur haar sandale se hakke met 'n knarsende skuurgeluid oor die grond te sleep en dan spring sy op, hande op die heupe.

"Mamma het gesê jy mag dit nie doen nie, Lily!"

"Maar ek's oukei," sê Lily giggelend. "Tunie, kom kyk hier. Kyk wat kan ek doen."

Petunia kyk rond. Die speelgrond is verlate afgesien van hulle twee en, al weet die meisies dit nie, Snape. Lily het 'n blom wat afgeval het van die bos waaragter Snape wegkruip, opgetel. Petunia kom nader, sigbaar in twee geskeur tussen nuuskierigheid en afkeer. Lily wag tot Petunia naby genoeg is om duidelik te kan sien, dan hou sy haar handpalm uit. Die blom lê daar en maak sy blare oop en toe soos 'n bisarre oester met baie lippe.

"Hou op!" skree Petunia.

"Dit maak jou mos nie seer nie," sê Lily, maar sy maak haar hand toe oor die blom en gooi dit op die grond neer.

"Dis nie reg nie," sê Petunia, maar haar oë het die vallende blom dopgehou en talm nou daarop waar dit op die grond lê. "Hoe kry jy dit reg?" voeg sy by, en daar is onmiskenbare verlange in haar stem.

"Dis mos duidelik, is dit nie?" Snape kan hom nie langer bedwing nie en spring agter die bosse uit. Petunia skrik en hardloop terug na die swaaie toe, maar Lily bly waar sy is, al het sy ook geskrik. Dit lyk of Snape jammer is hy het te voorskyn gekom. 'n Dowwe blos styg in sy bleek wange op terwyl hy na Lily kyk.

"Wat's duidelik?' vra Lily.

Snape lyk senuweeagtig en terselfdertyd opgewonde. Hy loer vlugtig na Petunia wat nou 'n ent weg by die swaaie staan, laat sak dan sy stem en sê: "Ek weet wat jy is."

"Wat bedoel jy?"

"Jy's . . . jy's 'n heks," fluister Snape.

Sy lyk beledig.

"*Dis* nie 'n baie mooi ding om vir iemand te sê nie!"

Sy draai neus in die lug weg en stap weg na haar suster toe.

"Nee!" sê Snape. Hy bloos nou bloedrooi en Harry wonder hoekom hy nie die belaglike groot jas uittrek nie, tensy dit is omdat hy nie wil hê hulle moet die oorbloes daaronder sien nie. Hy flap agter die meisies aan en lyk lagwekkend baie soos 'n vlermuis, net soos sy ouer self.

Die susters kyk hom aan, verenig in afkeer; albei hou aan een van die swaai se pale vas asof dit die bof in 'n vangspeletjie is.

"Jy *is*," sê Snape vir Lily. "Jy is 'n heks. Ek hou jou al 'n ruk lank dop. Maar daar's niks verkeerd daarmee nie. My ma's 'n heks en ek's 'n towenaar."

Petunia se lag is soos koue water.

"'n Towenaar!" sê sy; haar moed kom terug noudat sy herstel het van skok nadat hy so onverwags verskyn het. "*Ek* weet wie *jy* is. Jy's daai Snape-seun! Hulle bly onder by die rivier, in Spinnerstraat," sê sy vir Lily en haar stemtoon maak dit duidelik dat sy die adres as 'n swak aanbeveling beskou. "Hoekom het jy op ons gespioeneer?"

"Ek't nie gespioeneer nie," sê Snape ongemaklik. Hy kry warm en sy hare lyk vuil in die helder sonlig. "Ek sal in elk geval nie op *jou* spioeneer nie," voeg hy leedvermakerig by. "*Jy*'s 'n Moggel."

Al verstaan Petunia nie die woord nie, kan sy die stemtoon beswaarlik verkeerd interpreteer.

"Komaan, Lily, ons moet gaan!" sê sy skril. Lily maak dadelik soos haar suster sê en gluur Snape aan terwyl sy padgee. Hy staan en kyk hoe hulle by die speelgrond se hek uitmarsjeer, en Harry, die enigste een wat oor is om hom waar te neem, sien Snape se bitter teleurstelling, en verstaan dat Snape hierdie oomblik al 'n ruk lank beplan het, en dat alles skeefgeloop het . . .

Die toneel verdwyn, en as Harry hom weer kom kry, neem 'n ander een om hom vorm aan. Hy is nou in 'n klein bos bome. Hy sien 'n sonverligte rivier deur die boomstamme glinster. Die bome se skaduwees vorm 'n koel groen skadukol. Twee kinders sit met gekruiste bene oorkant mekaar op die grond. Snape het sy jas nou uitgetrek; sy vreemde oorbloes lyk minder eienaardig in die skemer.

". . . en die Ministerie kan jou straf as jy towerkuns buite die skool beoefen, jy kry briewe."

"Maar ek *het* al buitekant die skool getoor!"

"Ons is oukei. Ons het nog nie towerstawwe nie. Hulle los jou uit as jy 'n kind is en jy dit nie kan help nie. Maar as jy eers elf is," hy knik belangrik, "en hulle begin jou oplei, dan moet jy versigtig wees."

Daar is 'n kort stilte. Lily het 'n takkie wat afgeval het, opgetel en

draai dit nou in die lug rond, en Harry weet sy verbeel haar daar spat vonke uit. Dan laat val sy die takkie, leun nader aan die seun en sê: "Dit bestaan regtig, nè? Dis nie 'n grap nie? Petunia sê jy jok vir my. Petunia sê daar is nie 'n Hogwarts nie. Dit bestaan regtig, nè?"

"Dit bestaan vir ons," sê Snape. "Nie vir haar nie. Maar ons sal die brief kry, ek en jy."

"Regtig?" fluister Lily.

"Definitief," sê Snape, en selfs met sy sleg gesnyde hare en eienaardige klere lyk hy op 'n vreemde manier indrukwekkend hier waar hy voor haar sit, vol vertroue in sy lotsbestemming.

"En sal 'n uil dit regtig bring?" fluister Lily.

"Gewoonlik," sê Snape. "Maar jy's 'n Moggelgeborene, so iemand van die skool sal dit vir jou ouers moet kom verduidelik."

"Maak dit 'n verskil of 'n mens 'n Moggelgeborene is?"

Snape aarsel. Sy swart oë, gretig in die groen skaduwees, beweeg oor die bleek gesig, die donkerrooi hare.

"Nee," sê hy. "Dit maak g'n verskil nie."

"Goed so," sê Lily en ontspan; sy was duidelik bekommerd.

"Jy't hope towerkrag," sê Snape. "Ek het dit gesien. Al die kere dat ek jou dopgehou het . . ."

Sy stem draal weg; sy luister nie, maar strek haar uit op die grond vol blare en staar op na die blaredak bokant hulle. Hy hou haar so begerig dop soos hy haar by die speelgrond bespied het.

"Hoe gaan dit by jou huis?" vra Lily.

'n Dun plooitjie verskyn tussen sy oë.

"Oukei," sê hy.

"Baklei hulle nie meer nie?"

"O ja, hulle baklei," sê Snape. Hy tel 'n hand vol blare op en begin hulle uitmekaar skeur, blykbaar onbewus van wat hy doen. "Maar dis nie meer lank nie, dan is ek weg."

"Hou jou pa nie van toordery nie?"

"Hy hou nie eintlik van enigiets nie," sê Snape.

"Severus?"

Snape se mond krul op in 'n effense glimlag toe sy sy naam sê.

"Ja?"

"Vertel my weer van die Dementors."

"Hoekom wil jy van hulle weet?"

"As ek buite die skool towerkrag gebruik –"

"Hulle sal jou nie oor so iets vir die Dementors voer nie! Dementors is vir mense wat regtig verkeerde dinge doen. Hulle bewaak die towenaarstronk, Azkaban. Jy sal nooit in Azkaban beland nie, jy's te –"

Hy word weer rooi en skeur nog blare stukkend. Dan laat 'n sagte ritseling agter hom Harry omdraai: Petunia het haar balans verloor waar sy agter 'n boom wegkruip.

"Tunie!" sê Lily, haar stem verras en verwelkomend, maar Snape spring op.

"Wie spioeneer nou?" skreeu hy. "Wat wil jy hê?"

Petunia is uitasem en verskrik omdat sy uitgevang is. Harry kan sien sy sukkel om te dink aan iets geniepsigs om te sê.

"Wat's dit daai wat jy dra?" vra sy dan en wys na Snape se bors. "Jou ma se bloese?"

Daar is 'n *kraak*: 'n tak bokant Petunia se kop val grond toe. Lily skree: die tak vang Petunia se skouer en sy steier terug en bars in trane uit.

"Tunie!"

Maar Petunia hardloop weg. Lily vlieg Snape in.

"Het jy dit laat gebeur?"

"Nee." Hy lyk tegelykertyd uitdagend en bang.

"Jy het!" Sy gee 'n tree terug, weg van hom af. "Jy *het*! Jy't haar seergemaak!"

"Nee – nee, ek het nie!"

Maar die leuen oortuig Lily nie: ná een laaste vernietigende kyk hardloop sy by die bos uit, agter haar suster aan, en Snape lyk miserabel en verward . . .

En die toneel verander. Harry kyk rond: hy is op perron negeen-'n-driekwart en Snape staan langs hom, sy skouers effens krom, by 'n maer, suur bleekgesigvrou wat baie na hom lyk. Snape staar na 'n gesin van vier 'n entjie van hulle af. Die twee meisies staan effens van hulle ouers af weg. Dit lyk of Lily by haar suster pleit; Harry beweeg nader om te luister.

". . . Ek's jammer, Tunie, ek's jammer! Luister –" Sy gryp haar suster se hand en hou dit styf vas, al probeer Petunia dit wegruk. "As ek eers daar is, kan ek miskien – nee, luister, Tunie! As ek eers daar is, kan ek miskien na professor Dumbledore toe gaan en hom ompraat om van plan te verander!"

"Ek – wil nie – soontoe – gaan nie!" sê Petunia en begin haar hand uit haar suster se greep trek. "Dink jy ek wil na 'n simpel kasteel toe gaan en leer hoe word 'n mens 'n – 'n –"

Haar bleek oë dwaal oor die perron, oor die katte wat in hulle eienaars se arms miaau, oor die uile wat in hulle hokke fladder en vir mekaar hoe-hoe, oor die studente, party reeds in hulle lang swart klede, wat trommels in die helderrooi stoomlokomotief se waens laai of mekaar andersins met opgewonde gille groet ná die somervakansie.

"– dink jy ek wil 'n frats wees?"

Lily se oë word vol trane toe Petunia dit uiteindelik regkry om haar hand los te ruk.

"Ek is nie 'n frats nie," sê Lily. "Dis 'n aaklige ding om te sê."

"Dis waarheen jy gaan," sê Petunia en kry lekker. "'n Spesiale skool vir fratse. Jy en daai Snape-ou . . . malletjies, dis wat julle twee is. Dis goed julle word van normale mense af weggevat. Dis vir ons veiligheid."

Lily kyk na haar ouers wat oor die perron rondkyk en die toneel skynbaar met louter genot indrink. Dan kyk sy terug na haar suster, en haar stem is laag en driftig.

"Jy't nie gedink dis 'n skool vir fratse toe jy vir die skoolhoof geskryf en hom gesmeek het om jou te vat nie."

Petunia word vuurrrooi.

"Gesmeek? Ek het nie gesmeek nie!"

"Ek het sy antwoord gesien. Dit was baie goedig."

"Hoe kon jy dit lees?" fluister Petunia. "Dit was privaat – hoe kon jy –?"

Lily verklap haar geheim deur onderlangs te loer na Snape wat daar naby staan. Petunia snak na asem.

"Daai ou het dit gekry! Jy en daai ou het in my kamer rondgekrap!"

"Nee – nie rondgekrap nie –" Lily is nou op die verdediging uit. "Severus het die koevert gesien, en hy kon nie glo dat 'n Moggel Hogwarts kon kontak nie, dis al! Hy sê daar behoort towenaars te wees wat as geheime agente by die posdiens werk en van sulke goed ontslae raak –"

"Klink my towenaars steek hulle neuse oral in!" sê Petunia, wat nou so bleek is as wat sy rooi was. *"Frats!"* spoeg sy dit na haar suster uit, en storm weg na waar haar ouers staan . . .

Die toneel verdwyn weer. Snape haas hom met die Hogwarts Express se gang af terwyl die trein deur die platteland rammel. Hy het sy skoolkleed reeds aan; hy het bes moontlik van sy aaklige Moggelklere by die eerste die beste geleentheid ontslae geraak. Uiteindelik stop hy buite 'n kompartement waar 'n groep lawaaierige seuns sit en gesels. Ineengekrimp op 'n hoeksitplek langs die venster sit Lily, haar gesig teen die vensterruit vasgedruk.

Snape stoot die kompartement se deur oop en kom sit oorkant Lily. Sy kyk na hom en staar dan weer by die venster uit. Sy het gehuil.

"Ek wil nie met jou praat nie," sê sy in 'n skor stem.

"Hoekom nie?"

"Tunie h – haat my. Omdat ons daai brief van Dumbledore gesien het."

"So, wat daarvan?"

Sy kyk hom met groot afkeer aan.

"So, sy's my suster!"

"Sy's net 'n –" Hy keer homself vinnig, maar Lily hoor hom nie; sy is te besig om haar oë te probeer afvee sonder dat iemand haar sien.

"Maar ons is op pad!" sê hy en kan nie die opwinding in sy stem onderdruk nie. "Sowaar! Ons gaan Hogwarts toe!"

Sy knik terwyl sy haar oë afvee en glimlag half, ten spyte van haarself.

"Jy beter in Slytherin wees," sê Snape, aangemoedig deur die feit dat sy effens vroliker lyk.

"Slytherin?"

Een van die seuns wat die kompartement deel en tot dusver hoegenaamd geen belangstelling in Lily of Snape getoon het nie, kyk op toe hy die woord hoor, en Harry, wie se aandag uitsluitlik op die twee langs die venster gefokus was, sien sy pa: skraal en met swart hare soos Snape, maar met daardie ondefinieerbare iets wat sê hy is iemand wie goed versorg word en wat baie liefde kry, iets wat Snape so kennelik kortkom.

"Wie wil in Slytherin wees? Ek dink ek sal sommer waai, sal jy nie ook nie?" vra James vir die seun wat lui agteroor lê op die sitplekke oorkant hom, en Harry besef met 'n skok dit is Sirius. Sirius glimlag nie.

"My hele familie was in Slytherin," sê hy.

"Demmit," sê James, "en ek dog jy lyk oukei!"

Sirius grinnik.

"Miskien sal ek die tradisie verbreek. Waarheen sal jy wil gaan, as jy kan kies?"

James lig 'n onsigbare towerstaf.

"'*Gryffindor is my tuiste, by die dapperes van hart!*' Soos my pa."

Snape maak 'n sagte, minagtende geluid. James gaan oor op die aanval.

"Het jy 'n probleem daarmee?"

"Nee," sê Snape, al sê sy effense grynslag anders. "As jy eerder gespierd as slim wil wees –"

"Waarheen hoop jy om te gaan, aangesien jy nie een van die twee is nie?" val Sirius hom in die rede.

James brul van die lag. Lily sit regop, taamlik rooi in die gesig, en kyk met afkeer van James na Sirius.

"Komaan, Severus, kom ons gaan soek 'n ander kompartement."

"Oooooo . . ."

James en Sirius aap haar hooghartige stem na en James probeer Snape pootjie toe hy uitloop.

"Sien jou, Sissierus!" roep 'n stem toe die kompartement se deur toeklap . . .

En die toneel verdwyn weer eens . . .

Harry staan reg agter Snape en kyk na die kersverligte huistafels waarom daar opgetoë gesigte ingeryg is. Dan sê professor McGonagall: "Evans, Lily!"

Hy kyk hoe sy ma met bewerige bene vorentoe loop en op die lendelam stoeltjie gaan sit. Professor McGonagall laat sak die Sorteerhoed tot op haar kop en skaars 'n sekonde nadat dit aan die donkerrooi hare geraak het, roep die Hoed uit: *"Gryffindor!"*

Harry hoor Snape sag kreun. Lily haal die Hoed af, gee dit vir professor McGonagall terug en haas haar dan na die juigende Gryffindors, maar sy loer eers terug na Snape en daar is 'n hartseer glimlaggie op haar gesig. Harry sien hoe skuif Sirius op om plek vir haar op die bank te maak. Sy gee hom een kyk, herken hom blykbaar van die trein af, vou haar arms en draai haar rug beslis op hom.

Die Sortering gaan voort. Harry kyk hoe Lupin, Pettigrew en sy pa by Lily en Sirius aan die Gryffindor-tafel aansluit. Uiteindelik is daar nog net 'n dosyn studente oor wat ge-Sorteer moet word en professor McGonagall roep Snape se naam uit.

Harry loop saam met hom na die stoeltjie toe en kyk hoe hy die Hoed op sy kop sit. *"Slytherin!"* kondig die Sorteerhoed aan.

En Severus Snape beweeg na die oorkant van die Saal, weg van Lily af, na waar die Slytherins hom toejuig, na waar Lucius Malfoy, met 'n prefekwapen wat op sy bors blink, Snape op die rug klop toe hy langs hom kom sit . . .

En die toneel verander . . .

Lily en Snape loop deur die kasteel se binnehof, duidelik aan die stry. Harry gaan sluit haastig by hulle aan om te luister. Toe hy by hulle kom, besef hy hoeveel langer hulle albei is: 'n paar jaar het blykbaar sedert hulle Sortering verloop.

". . . gedog ons is veronderstel om vriende te wees?" sê Snape. "Beste vriende!"

"Ons *is*, Sev, maar ek hou nie van sommige van die mense met wie jy rondhang nie! Ek's jammer, maar ek verpes Avery en Mulciber! *Mulciber!* Wat sien jy in hom, Sev? Hy's grillerig! Weet jy wat hy nou die dag aan Mary Macdonald probeer doen het?"

Lily het nou by 'n pilaar gekom; sy leun daarteen en kyk op in die dun, bleek gesig.

"Dit was niks nie," sê Snape. "Dit was 'n grap, dis al –"

"Dit was Donker Towerkuns, en as jy dink dis snaaks –"

"Wat van die goed wat Potter en sy pelle aanvang?" wil Snape weet. Hy word rooi in die gesig terwyl hy dit sê; hy kan sy wrewel duidelik nie inhou nie.

"Wat het Potter met enigiets te doen?" vra Lily.

"Hulle sluip snags uit. Daar's iets vreemds aan daai Lupin. Waarheen gaan hy heeltyd?"

"Hy's siek," sê Lily. "Hulle sê hy's siek –"

"Elke maand met volmaan?" sê Snape.

"Ek ken jou teorie," sê Lily en sy klink kil. "Hoekom is jy in elk geval so behep met hulle? Wat maak dit saak wat hulle snags doen?"

"Ek probeer net vir jou wys hulle's nie so wonderlik soos almal dink nie."

Die intensiteit van sy blik laat haar bloos.

"Maar hulle gebruik nie Donker Towerkuns nie." Sy laat haar stem sak. "En jy's regtig baie ondankbaar. Ek het gehoor wat nou die nag gebeur het. Jy't by daai tonnel by die Woelige Wilg ingesluip en James Potter het jou gered van wat ook al daar onder is –"

Snape se hele gesig vertrek en hy stamel: "Gered? Gered? Dink jy hy't sy lyf held gehou? Hy't sy eie bas gered – en sy vriende s'n ook! Jy gaan nie – ek sal nie toelaat dat jy –"

"My *toelaat*? My *toelaat*?"

Lily se heldergroen oë is skrefies. Snape kabbel onmiddellik terug.

"Ek het nie bedoel – ek wil net nie hê hy moet 'n gek van jou maak nie – hy is verlief op jou, James Potter is verlief op jou!" Dit is asof die woorde teen sy sin uit hom gewurg word. "En hy's nie . . . Almal dink . . . Groot Kwiddiekheld –" Snape se bitterheid en renons maak hom onsamehangend en Lily se wenkbroue beweeg verder en verder teen haar voorkop op.

"Ek weet James Potter is 'n arrogante gomtor," sê sy voor Snape kan voortgaan. "Ek het jou nie nodig om dit vir my te sê nie. Maar Mulciber en Avery se idee van 'n grap is doodeenvoudig boos. *Boos*, Sev. Ek verstaan nie hoe jy met hulle vriende kan wees nie."

Harry twyfel of Snape ooit haar kritiek op Mulciber en Avery gehoor het. Die oomblik toe sy James Potter beledig, het sy hele liggaam ontspan, en toe hulle wegstap, is daar 'n nuwe huppel in Snape se stap . . .

En die toneel verdwyn . . .

Harry kyk weer hoe Snape by die Groot Saal uitkom nadat hy sy UIL in Verdediging Teen die Donker Kunste afgelê het, kyk hoe hy weg van die kasteel af beweeg en onbedoeld afdwaal na die plek onder die beukeboom waar James, Sirius, Lupin en Pettigrew saam sit. Maar Harry bly hierdie keer op 'n afstand, want hy weet wat gebeur het toe James Severus in die lug opgehys en hom gekoggel het; hy weet wat gedoen en gesê is, en dit gaan hom geen plesier verskaf om dit weer te hoor nie. Hy kyk hoe Lily by die groep aansluit en Snape begin verdedig. Op 'n afstand hoor hy hoe Snape in sy vernedering en sy woede die onvergeeflike woord na haar toe uitskree: *"Modderbloed!"*

Die toneel verdwyn . . .

"Ek's jammer."

"Ek stel nie belang nie."

"Ek's jammer."

"Spaar jou asem."

Dit is aand. Lily, wat 'n kamerjas aanhet, staan met haar arms gevou voor die portret van die Vet Vrou by die ingang na Gryffindor se Toring.

"Ek het net uitgekom omdat Mary vir my gesê het jy dreig om hier te slaap."

"Ek het. Ek sou. Ek het nie bedoel om jou 'n Modderbloed te noem nie, dit het net –"

"Uitgeglip?" Daar is geen jammerte in Lily se stem nie. "Dis te laat. Ek het jare lank vir jou verskonings gemaak. Nie een van my vriende kan verstaan hoekom ek selfs met jou praat nie. Jy en jou dierbare Doodsetervriendjies – sien jy, jy ontken dit nie eens nie! Jy ontken nie eens dis wat julle almal eendag wil wees nie! Jy kan nie wag om by Jy-Weet-Wie aan te sluit nie, nè?"

Hy maak sy mond oop, maar maak dit weer toe sonder om te praat.

"Ek kan nie meer voorgee nie. Jy't jou pad gekies, en ek myne."

"Nee – luister, ek het nie bedoel –"

"– om my 'n Modderbloed te noem nie? Maar jy noem almal wat soos ek gebore is Modderbloede, Severus. Wat maak my anders?"

Hy wil wroegend begin praat, maar sy draai met 'n veragtende blik om en klim terug deur die portret se opening . . .

Die gang verdwyn, en die volgende toneel neem effens langer om vorm aan te neem: dit is asof Harry deur veranderende vorms en kleure vlieg totdat alles om hom weer stol en hy staan nou op 'n heuweltop, verlate en koud in die donker; die wind fluit deur 'n paar blaarlose bome se takke. Die volwasse Snape haal hygend

asem, draai op een plek in die rondte met sy towerstaf styf vas in sy hand, wag vir iets of iemand . . . Sy vrees steek Harry ook aan, selfs al weet hy dat hy nie kan seerkry nie, en hy kyk oor sy skouer en wonder waarvoor Snape wag –

Dan skiet 'n verblindende, getande straal wit lig deur die lug: Harry dink aan weerlig, maar Snape val op sy knieë neer en sy towerstaf vlieg uit sy hand.

"Moenie my doodmaak nie!"

"Dit was nie my bedoeling nie."

Enige geluid van Dumbledore wat Appareer, is verdoof deur die geluid van die wind in die takke. Hy staan voor Snape met sy kleed wat om hom wapper, en sy gesig word van onder belig deur die lig wat sy towerstaf uitstraal.

"Wel, Severus? Watter boodskap het die Heer Voldemort vir my?"

"Geen – geen boodskap nie – ek is op eie houtjie hier!"

Snape wring sy hande: hy lyk effens waansinnig, met sy toiingrige swart hare wat in alle rigtings waai.

"Ek – ek kom met 'n waarskuwing – nee, 'n versoek – asseblief –"

Dumbledore piets met sy towerstaf. Al vlieg blare en takke nog deur die naglug om hulle rond, daal daar stilte neer op die plek waar hy en Snape mekaar konfronteer.

"Watter versoek kan 'n Doodseter tot my rig?"

"Die – die profesie . . . die voorspelling . . . Trelawney . . ."

"A ja," sê Dumbledore. "Hoeveel daarvan het jy aan die Heer Voldemort oorgedra?"

"Alles – alles wat ek gehoor het!" sê Snape. "Dit is hoekom – dit is om daardie rede – hy dink dit beteken Lily Evans!"

"Die profesie het nie na 'n vrou verwys nie," sê Dumbledore. "Dit het gepraat van 'n seun gebore teen die einde van Julie –"

"Jy weet wat ek bedoel! Hy dink dit beteken haar seun, hy gaan haar opspoor – hulle almal doodmaak –"

"As sy soveel vir jou beteken," sê Dumbledore, "sal die Heer Voldemort haar tog sekerlik spaar. Kan jy nie vra vir genade vir die ma nie, in ruil vir die seun?"

"Ek het – ek het hom gevra –"

"Jy walg my," sê Dumbledore, en Harry het nog nooit soveel veragting in sy stem gehoor nie. Snape krimp effens ineen. "Haar man en kind se dood kan jou dus nie skeel nie? Hulle kan maar doodgaan, solank jy kry wat jy wil hê?"

Snape sê niks nie, maar kyk net op na Dumbledore.

"Steek hulle dan almal weg," sê hy skor. "Hou hulle – almal – veilig. Asseblief."

"En wat gaan jy vir my in ruil gee, Severus?"

"In – in ruil?" Snape gaap Dumbledore aan, en Harry verwag hy gaan protesteer, maar ná 'n lang oomblik sê hy: "Enigiets."

Die heuweltop verdwyn en Harry staan in Dumbledore se kantoor, en iets maak 'n aaklige geluid, soos 'n gewonde dier. Snape sit vooroor gesak op 'n stoel en Dumbledore staan bokant hom en lyk somber. Ná 'n oomblik of twee lig Snape sy gesig en hy lyk soos 'n man wat 'n honderd jaar van ellende deurleef het vandat hy op daardie onstuimige heuweltop was.

"Ek dog . . . jy sou . . . haar . . . veilig hou . . ."

"Sy en James het die verkeerde persoon vertrou," sê Dumbledore, "Baie soos jy, Severus. Het jy nie gehoop die Heer Voldemort sal haar spaar nie?"

Snape haal vlak asem.

"Haar seun het oorleef," sê Dumbledore.

Snape se kop ruk effens, asof hy 'n lastige vlieg verjaag.

"Haar seun lewe. Hy het haar oë, uitgeknip haar oë. Ek is seker jy onthou die vorm en kleur van Lily Evans se oë?"

"MOENIE!" brul Snape. "Weg . . . Dood . . ."

"Is dit berou hierdie, Severus?"

"Ek wens . . . ek wens *ek* was dood . . ."

"En van watter nut sal dit vir enigiemand wees?" vra Dumbledore ysig. "As jy Lily Evans liefgehad het, as jy haar waarlik liefgehad het, dan is jou pad vorentoe duidelik."

Dit is asof Snape deur 'n waas van pyn kyk en Dumbledore se woorde 'n hele ruk neem om tot hom deur te dring.

"Wat – wat bedoel jy?"

"Jy weet hoe en hoekom sy dood is. Maak seker dit was nie tevergeefs nie. Help my om Lily se seun te beskerm."

"Hy het nie beskerming nodig nie. Die Donker Heer is weg –"

"– die Donker Heer sal terugkeer, en wanneer dit gebeur, sal Harry Potter in lewensgevaar wees."

Daar is 'n lang stilte en Snape kry geleidelik weer beheer oor homself en sy asemhaling. Uiteindelik sê hy: "Nou goed. Goed dan. Maar moet nooit – nooit vir enigiemand vertel nie, Dumbledore! Dit moet tussen ons bly! Sweer dit! Ek kan dit nie verdra nie . . . Potter van alle mense se seun . . . Ek wil jou woord daarvoor hê!"

"Jy vra my woord, Severus, dat ek nooit die beste in jou sal openbaar nie?" Dumbledore sug en kyk af in Snape se wilde, gefolterde gesig. "As jy daarop aandring . . ."

Die kantoor verdwyn, maar neem dadelik weer vorm aan. Snape loop heen en weer voor Dumbledore.

"– middelmatig, arrogant soos sy pa, vasberade om alle reëls te oortree, verheug oor sy roem, 'n aandagsoeker, astrant –"

"Jy sien wat jy verwag om te sien, Severus," sê Dumbledore sonder om sy oë van 'n eksemplaar van *Transfigurasie Teenswoordig* af op te lig. "Ander onderwysers deel my weer mee dat die seun beskeie, aangenaam en taamlik talentvol is. Persoonlik vind ek hom 'n innemende kind."

Dumbledore blaai 'n bladsy om en sê sonder om op te kyk: "Hou 'n ogie oor Quirrell, sal jy?"

'n Warreling van kleur, en nou is alles donker, en Snape en Dumbledore staan 'n entjie uitmekaar in die Ingangsportaal terwyl die laaste studente wat by die Kersbal was en nou op pad bed toe is verby hulle beweeg.

"Wel?" prewel Dumbledore.

"Karkaroff se Merk word ook donkerder. Hy is paniekerig, hy vrees vergelding; jy weet hoeveel hulp hy aan die Ministerie verleen het ná die Donker Heer tot 'n val gekom het." Snape kyk skuinsweg na Dumbledore se kromneusprofiel. "Karkaroff is van plan om te vlug as die Merk begin brand."

"Sowaar?" sê Dumbledore sag terwyl Fleur Delacour en Roger Davies giggelend van buite af inkom. "En is jy in die versoeking om by hom aan te sluit?"

"Nee," sê Snape met sy swart oë op Fleur en Roger wat retireer. "Ek is nie so 'n lafaard nie."

"Nee," stem Dumbledore saam. "Jy is baie dapperder as Igor Karkaroff. Weet jy, soms dink ek ons Sorteer te gou . . ."

Hy loop weg en Snape lyk verslae . . .

En nou staan Harry weer eens in die skoolhoof se kantoor. Dit is nag, en Dumbledore sitlê skuins op die troonagtige stoel agter die lessenaar, skynbaar half bewusteloos. Sy regterarm hang oor die kant, swart en verbrand. Snape se towerstaf is op die hand se pols gerig en hy prewel inkantasies terwyl hy met sy linkerhand 'n beker gevul met 'n dik goue towerdrankie in Dumbledore se keel omkeer. Ná 'n oomblik of twee fladder Dumbledore se ooglede en gaan oop.

"Hoekom?" vra Snape sonder omhaal, "*hoekom* het jy daai ring aangesit? Dit dra 'n vloek, jy moes dit tog besef het. Hoekom selfs daaraan raak?"

Marvolo Gaunt se ring lê op die lessenaar voor Dumbledore. Dit is gekraak; Gryffindor se swaard lê langsaan.

Dumbledore se gesig vertrek van pyn.

"Ek . . . was 'n idioot. Ten seerste 'n versoeking . . ."
"Watse versoeking?"
Dumbledore antwoord nie.
"Dis 'n wonderwerk dat jy dit reggekry het om hierheen terug te kom!" Snape klink woedend. "Daardie ring dra 'n ongelooflike sterk vloek, al wat ons kan hoop om te doen, is om dit in bedwang te hou; ek het die vloek voorlopig in jou hand vasgevang –"
Dumbledore lig sy swart gebrande, hulpelose hand en betrag dit met die uitdrukking van iemand wat na 'n interessante artefak kyk.
"Jy het goeie werk gedoen, Severus. Hoe lank dink jy het ek?"
Dumbledore se stemtoon is gesellig; hy kon net sowel vir die weervoorspelling gevra het. Snape huiwer en sê dan: "Ek kan nie sê nie. Miskien 'n jaar. So 'n towerspreuk kan nie vir ewig gestuit word nie. Dit sal uiteindelik versprei, dit is die soort vloek wat mettertyd sterker word."
Dumbledore glimlag. Die nuus dat hy minder as 'n jaar oorhet om te lewe, is blykbaar van min of geen belang vir hom nie.
"Ek is gelukkig, besonder gelukkig, om jou te hê, Severus."
"As jy my net 'n bietjie vroeër ontbied het, sou ek miskien meer kon gedoen het, vir jou meer tyd kon koop!" sê Snape woedend. Hy kyk af na die gebreekte ring en die swaard. "Het jy gedink jy sal die vloek verbreek as jy die ring breek?"
"So iets, ja . . . Ek was ongetwyfeld ylhoofdig . . ." sê Dumbledore. Hy kom met inspanning regop in sy stoel. "Wel, dit maak dinge eintlik baie eenvoudiger."
Snape lyk totaal in die war. Dumbledore glimlag.
"Ek verwys na die Heer Voldemort se plan ten opsigte van my. Sy plan om my deur die arme Malfoy-seun te laat vermoor."
Snape kom sit op die stoel waarop Harry so baie gesit het, oorkant die lessenaar van Dumbledore af. Harry kan sien hy wil meer sê oor Dumbledore se hand waarin die vloek vasgevang is, maar die skoolhoof lig dit en wys beleefd hy weier om die saak verder te bespreek. Snape sê fronsend: "Die Donker Heer verwag nie dat Draco sal slaag nie. Dit is slegs straf vir Lucius se onlangse mislukkings. Stadige marteling vir Draco se ouers terwyl hulle kyk hoe hy misluk en die prys betaal."
"Kortom, daar is 'n doodsvonnis oor die seun uitgespreek, net so seker soos oor my," sê Dumbledore. "Nou ja, ek veronderstel die natuurlike opvolger vir die taak, sodra Draco misluk, is jy?"
Daar is 'n kort pouse.
"Ek vermoed dit is die Donker Heer se plan."

"Voorsien die Heer Voldemort 'n oomblik in die nabye toekoms wanneer hy nie 'n spioen in Hogwarts nodig sal hê nie?"

"Ja, hy glo die skool gaan binnekort in sy mag wees."

"En as dit wel in sy mag kom," sê Dumbledore amper terloops, "het ek jou woord dat jy alles in jou vermoë sal doen om Hogwarts se studente te beskerm?"

Snape knik stywerig sy kop.

"Goed so. Nou ja, jou eerste prioriteit gaan wees om uit te vind wat Draco in die skild voer. 'n Bevreesde tienerseun is 'n gevaar vir ander sowel as homself. Bied hom jou hulp en leiding aan, hy behoort dit te aanvaar, hy hou van jou –"

"– baie minder vandat sy pa in onguns geraak het. Draco verkwalik my, hy dink ek het Lucius se posisie wederregtelik vir my toegeëien."

"Nogtans, probeer. Ek is minder bekommerd oor myself as oor onvoorsiene slagoffers van watter sluwe planne die seun ook al mag smee. Op die lange duur is daar natuurlik net een ding wat ons kan doen om hom van die Heer Voldemort se toorn te red."

Snape lig 'n wenkbrou en vra sardonies: "Is jy van plan om toe te laat dat hy jou doodmaak?"

"Beslis nie. *Jy* moet my doodmaak."

Daar is 'n lang stilte wat net elke nou en dan deur 'n vreemde klikgeluid onderbreek word. Fawkes die feniks knabbel aan 'n stukkie inkvisskulp.

"Wil jy hê ek moet dit nou doen?" vra Snape met 'n stem wat drup van ironie. "Of wil jy eers 'n paar oomblikke hê om 'n grafskrif op te stel?"

"O, nie nou al nie," sê Dumbledore glimlaggend. "Ek veronderstel die geleentheid sal hom te gelegener tyd voordoen. Gegewe wat vanaand gebeur het," hy wys na sy verskrompelde hand, "kan ons verseker wees dat dit binne 'n jaar gaan gebeur."

"As jy nie omgee om dood te gaan nie," sê Snape bruusk, "hoekom laat jy Draco dit nie doen nie?"

"Daardie seun se siel is nog nie so geskaad nie," sê Dumbledore. "Ek wil nie hê dit moet om my onthalwe uitmekaar geskeur word nie."

"En my siel, Dumbledore? Myne?"

"Slegs jy weet of dit jou siel skade sal aandoen om 'n ou man te help om pyn en vernedering te vermy," sê Dumbledore. "Ek vra jou hierdie een groot guns, Severus, want die dood kom my haal, so seker as wat die Chudley Cannons vanjaar onderaan die liga gaan eindig. Ek moet erken, ek sou 'n vinnige, pynlose heengaan verkies

bo die uitgerekte en morsige affêre wat dit sal afgee as Greyback byvoorbeeld betrokke is – ek hoor Voldemort het hom gewerf? Of liewe Bellatrix, wat daarvan hou om met haar kos te speel voor sy dit eet."

Sy stemtoon is lig, maar sy oë deurpriem Snape soos so dikwels vir Harry, asof die siel wat hulle bespreek vir hom sigbaar is. Uiteindelik knik Snape weer stug.

Dumbledore lyk tevrede.

"Dankie, Severus . . ."

Die kantoor verdwyn, en nou loop Snape en Dumbledore saam in die skemer deur die kasteel se verlate terrein.

"Wat doen jy met Potter, al die aande dat julle saam agter geslote deure is?" vra Snape skielik.

Dumbledore lyk uitgeput.

"Hoekom? Ek hoop nie jy probeer vir hom *meer* detensie gee nie, Severus? Die seun sal binnekort meer tyd in detensie deurbring as daaruit."

"Hy is presies nes sy pa –"

"Miskien wat die uiterlike betref, maar in sy diepste wese is hy baie meer soos sy ma. Ek bring tyd saam met Harry deur, want daar is dinge wat ek met hom moet bespreek, inligting wat ek vir hom moet gee voor dit te laat is."

"Inligting," herhaal Snape. "Jy vertrou hom . . . maar jy vertrou my nie."

"Dit is nie 'n kwessie van vertroue nie. Soos ons albei weet, is my tyd beperk. Dit is noodsaaklik dat ek vir die seun genoeg inligting gee sodat hy kan doen wat hy moet doen."

"En hoekom mag ek nie daardie selfde inligting kry nie?"

"Ek verkies om nie al my geheime in een mandjie te plaas nie, veral nie 'n mandjie wat soveel van die tyd aan die Heer Voldemort se arm hang nie."

"Ek doen dit op jou bevel!"

"En jy doen dit besonder goed. Moenie dink ek onderskat die konstante gevaar waarin jy jouself plaas nie, Severus. Om vir Voldemort inligting te gee wat waardevol lyk terwyl jy die essensiële weerhou, is 'n taak wat ek aan niemand anders as jy sal toevertrou nie."

"Nogtans neem jy 'n seun wat nie tot Okklumensie in staat is nie, wie se towerkuns middelmatig is en wat 'n direkte verbintenis met die Donker Heer se gedagtes het meer in jou vertroue!"

"Voldemort vrees daardie verbintenis," sê Dumbledore. "Nie so lank gelede nie het hy een klein voorsmakie gehad van wat dit vir

hom behels om waarlik in Harry se gedagtes te deel. Dit was pyn soos wat hy nog nooit vantevore ervaar het nie. Hy sal nie weer van Harry besit probeer neem nie, daarvan is ek seker. Nie op daardie manier nie."

"Ek verstaan nie."

"Die Heer Voldemort se siel, vermink soos wat dit is, kan nie intieme kontak met 'n siel soos Harry s'n verduur nie. Dis soos 'n tong op gevriesde staal, soos vlees in vlamme –"

"Siele? Ons praat van gedagtes!"

"In die geval van Harry en die Heer Voldemort: om van die een te praat is om van die ander te praat."

Dumbledore kyk rond om seker te maak hulle is alleen. Hulle is nou naby die Verbode Woud, maar daar is nêrens 'n teken van iemand naby hulle nie.

"Nadat jy my doodgemaak het, Severus –"

"Jy weier om my alles te vertel, maar jy verwag steeds ek moet daardie klein gunsie vir jou doen!" snou Snape hom toe en ware woede vlam nou in die skraal gesig op. "Jy neem baie as vanselfsprekend aan, Dumbledore! Miskien het ek van plan verander!"

"Jy't vir my jou woord gegee, Severus. En terwyl ons praat oor gunste wat jy my skuld, ek dog jy het ingestem om 'n deeglike oog te hou oor ons jong Slytherin-vriend?"

Snape lyk woedend, opstandig. Dumbledore sug.

"Kom vanaand elfuur na my kantoor toe, Severus, dan sal jy nie meer kla dat ek geen vertroue in jou het nie . . ."

Hulle is terug in Dumbledore se kantoor, die vensters is donker en Fawkes sit stil terwyl Snape beweginglo os sit, en Dumbledore al pratende om hom loop.

"Harry moenie weet nie, nie tot op die laaste oomblik nie, nie tot dit nodig is nie, want hoe anders gaan hy die krag hê om te doen wat gedoen moet word?"

"Maar wat moet hy doen?"

"Dit is tussen my en Harry. Luister nou mooi, Severus. Daar sal 'n tyd kom – ná my dood – moenie teëpraat nie, moenie my onderbreek nie! Daar sal 'n tyd kom wanneer die Heer Voldemort vir sy slang se lewe gaan vrees."

"Vir Nagini?" Snape lyk verstom.

"Presies. As daar 'n tyd kom wanneer die Heer Voldemort ophou om sy slang weg te stuur om sy bevele uit te voer, maar haar veilig by hom hou, onder towerbeskerming, dan dink ek sal dit veilig wees om Harry te vertel."

"Om hom wat te vertel?"

Dumbledore haal diep asem en maak sy oë toe.

"Om hom te vertel wat gebeur het die aand toe die Heer Voldemort hom probeer doodmaak het, toe Lily haar eie lewe as 'n skild tussen hulle ingewerp het. Die Moordvloek het na die Heer Voldemort teruggekaats, en 'n stukkie van Voldemort se siel is losgeskiet van die res en het dit vasgeheg aan die enigste lewende siel wat in daardie verwoeste gebou oor was. 'n Deel van die Heer Voldemort lewe binne-in Harry, en dit is wat aan hom die mag gee om met slange te praat, en 'n verbintenis met die Heer Voldemort se gedagtes te hê wat hy nog nooit kon verstaan nie. En terwyl daardie stukkie siel wat Voldemort nie vermis nie aan Harry vasgeheg bly en deur hom beskerm word, kan die Heer Voldemort nie sterf nie."

Dit is asof Harry twee mans van een kant van 'n lang tonnel af dophou, so ver is hulle van hom af en so vreemd eggo hulle stemme in sy ore.

"So die seun . . . die seun moet sterf?" vra Snape doodkalm.

"En Voldemort moet dit self doen, Severus. Dit is noodsaaklik."

Nog 'n lang stilte. Dan sê Snape: "Ek dog . . . al hierdie jare . . . ons beskerm hom vir haar. Vir Lily."

"Ons het hom beskerm omdat dit noodsaaklik was om hom te onderrig, om hom groot te maak, om hom sy krag te laat toets," sê Dumbledore met sy oë nog styf toe. "Intussen word die verbintenis tussen hulle steeds sterker, 'n parasitiese gewas: ek het al gedink hy vermoed dit self. Soos ek hom ken, sal Harry seker maak hy reël alles op so 'n manier dat wanneer hy sy dood tegemoet gaan, dit waarlik die einde van Voldemort sal beteken."

Dumbledore maak sy oë oop. Snape lyk vervul met afgryse.

"Jy het hom aan die lewe gehou sodat hy op die regte oomblik kan doodgaan?"

"Moenie geskok wees nie, Severus. Hoeveel mans en vroue het jy al dopgehou terwyl hulle sterf?"

"In die laaste tyd net dié wat ek nie kon red nie," sê Snape. Hy staan op. "Jy het my gebruik."

"Bedoelende?"

"Ek het vir jou gespioeneer, vir jou gelieg, myself in lewensgevaar gestel vir jou. Alles was veronderstel om Lily Potter se seun veilig te hou. Nou sê jy vir my jy't hom grootgemaak soos 'n lam ter slagting –"

"Dis werklik aandoenlik, Severus," sê Dumbledore ernstig. "Het jy op die ou end vir die seun begin omgee?"

"Vir *hom*?" skree Snape. "*Expecto patronum!*"

Daar bars 'n silwer takbokooi by die punt van sy towerstaf uit:

sy land op die kantoor se vloer, spring een keer dwarsoor die kantoor en seil by die venster uit. Dumbledore kyk hoe sy wegsweef en toe haar silwerige gloed taan, draai hy terug na Snape en sy oë is vol trane.

"Ná al hierdie tyd?"

"Altyd," sê Snape.

En die toneel verdwyn. Nou sien Harry hoe Snape met die portret van Dumbledore agter sy lessenaar praat.

"Jy sal vir Voldemort die regte datum moet gee van Harry se vertrek by sy tante en oom se huis," sê Dumbledore. "As jy dit nie doen nie, sal dit agterdog wek, want Voldemort glo jy is baie goed ingelig. Jy moet egter die idee van lokvoëls plant – ek dink dit behoort Harry se veiligheid te verseker. Doen 'n Warvloek op Mundungus Fletcher. En Severus, as jy gedwing word om aan die agtervolging deel te neem, maak seker jy vertolk jou rol oortuigend . . . Ek reken op jou om so lank moontlik in die Heer Voldemort se goeie boekies te bly, anders gaan Hogwarts aan die Carrows se genade oorgelewer wees . . ."

Nou sit Snape van aangesig tot aangesig teenoor Mundungus in 'n onbekende kroeg. Mundungus se gesig lyk vreemd uitdrukkingloos en Snape frons soos hy konsentreer.

"Jy gaan vir die Orde van die Feniks voorstel," prewel Snape, "dat hulle lokvoëls moet gebruik. Polisouspaljas. Identiese Potters. Dis die enigste ding wat dalk sal werk. Jy gaan vergeet dat ek dit voorgestel het. Jy gaan maak of dit jou eie idee is. Verstaan jy?"

"Ek verstaan," prewel Mundungus, sy oë uit fokus . . .

Nou vlieg Harry langs Snape op 'n besemstok deur 'n helder, donker nag: hy word begelei deur ander Doodseters met mantelkappe op, en voor hulle is Lupin en 'n Harry wat in werklikheid George is . . . 'n Doodseter beweeg voor Snape in, lig sy towerstaf en rig dit reguit op Lupin se rug . . .

"*Sectumsempra!*" skree Snape.

Maar die towerspreuk wat vir die Doodseter se hand bedoel is, is mis en tref George in plaas van hom –

En volgende kniel Snape in Sirius se ou slaapkamer. Trane drup by die punt van sy haakneus af terwyl hy Lily se brief lees. Daar is net 'n paar woorde op die tweede bladsy:

ooit vriende met Gellert Grindelwald kon gewees het. Ek dink persoonlik sy is besig om van haar kop af te gaan!
Baie liefde
Lily

Snape neem die bladsy waarop Lily se handtekening is, en haar liefde, en steek dit by sy kleed in. Dan skeur hy die foto wat hy ook vashou middeldeur sodat hy die deel waaruit Lily lag, kan hou en gooi die deel wat James en Harry wys terug op die vloer, onder die laaikas in . . .

En nou staan Snape weer in die skoolhoof se studeerkamer terwyl Phineas Nigellus hom by sy portret in haas.

"Skoolhoof! Hulle kampeer in Dean se Woud! Die Modderbloed –"

"Moenie daardie woord gebruik nie!"

"– die Granger-meisie dan, het die plek genoem terwyl sy haar handsak oopmaak en ek het haar gehoor!"

"Mooi so. Baie mooi!" roep Dumbledore se portret agter die skoolhoof se stoel uit. "Nou die swaard, Severus! Moenie vergeet nie, dit moet in omstandighede van nood en dapperheid geneem word – en hy moenie weet dis jy wat dit gee nie! As Voldemort Harry se gedagtes moet lees en sien jy tree in sy belang op –"

"Ek weet," sê Snape kortaf. Hy beweeg tot voor die portret van Dumbledore en trek aan die een kant. Dit swaai vorentoe en ontbloot 'n versteekte holte daaragter waaruit hy Gryffindor se swaard haal.

"En gaan jy nog steeds nie vir my sê hoekom dit so belangrik is om die swaard vir Potter te gee nie?" vra Snape terwyl hy 'n reismantel oor sy kleed gooi.

"Nee, ek dink nie so nie," sê Dumbledore se portret. "Hy sal weet wat om daarmee te doen. En Severus, wees baie versigtig, hulle sal dalk nie ná George Weasley se ongelukkie daarmee geneë wees as jy jou opwagting maak nie –"

Snape draai by die deur om.

"Toemaar, Dumbledore," sê hy koel. "Ek het 'n plan . . ."

En Snape verlaat die vertrek. Harry kom van die Peinssif af op en oomblikke later lê hy op die tapytvloer in presies dieselfde vertrek: Snape kon die deur net sowel pas toegemaak het.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



THE FOREST AGAIN

Finally, the truth. Lying with his face pressed into the dusty carpet of the office where he had once thought he was learning the secrets of victory, Harry understood at last that he was not supposed to survive. His job was to walk calmly into Death's welcoming arms. Along the way, he was to dispose of Voldemort's remaining links to life, so that when at last he flung himself across Voldemort's path, and did not raise a wand to defend himself, the end would be clean, and the job that ought to have been done in Godric's Hollow would be finished: Neither would live, neither could survive.

He felt his heart pounding fiercely in his chest. How strange that in his dread of death, it pumped all the harder, valiantly keeping him alive. But it would have to stop, and soon. Its beats were numbered.

How many would there be time for, as he rose and walked through the castle for the last time, out into the grounds and into the forest?

Terror washed over him as he lay on the floor, with that funeral drum pounding inside him. Would it hurt to die? All those times he had thought that it was about to happen and escaped, he had never really thought of the thing itself: His will to live had always been so much stronger than his fear of death. Yet it did not occur to him now to try to escape, to outrun Voldemort. It was over, he knew it, and all that was left was the thing itself: dying.

If he could only have died on that summer's night when he had left number four, Privet Drive, for the last time, when the noble phoenix-feather wand had saved him! If he could only have died like Hedwig, so quickly he would not have known it had happened! Or if he could have launched himself in front of a wand to save someone he loved. . . . He envied even his parents' deaths now. This cold-blooded walk to his own destruction would require a different kind of bravery. He felt his fingers trembling slightly and made an effort to control them, although no one could see him; the portraits on the walls were all empty.

Slowly, very slowly, he sat up, and as he did so he felt more alive and more aware of his own living body than ever before. Why had he never appreciated what a miracle he was, brain and nerve and bounding heart? It would all be gone . . . or at least, he would be gone from it. His breath came slow and deep, and his mouth and throat were completely dry, but so were his eyes.

Dumbledore's betrayal was almost nothing. Of course there had been a bigger plan; Harry had simply been too foolish to see it, he

realized that now. He had never questioned his own assumption that Dumbledore wanted him alive. Now he saw that his life span had always been determined by how long it took to eliminate all the Horcruxes. Dumbledore had passed the job of destroying them to him, and obediently he had continued to chip away at the bonds tying not only Voldemort, but himself, to life! How neat, how elegant, not to waste any more lives, but to give the dangerous task to the boy who had already been marked for slaughter, and whose death would not be a calamity, but another blow against Voldemort.

And Dumbledore had known that Harry would not duck out, that he would keep going to the end, even though it was *his* end, because he had taken trouble to get to know him, hadn't he? Dumbledore knew, as Voldemort knew, that Harry would not let anyone else die for him now that he had discovered it was in his power to stop it. The images of Fred, Lupin, and Tonks lying dead in the Great Hall forced their way back into his mind's eye, and for a moment he could hardly breathe: Death was impatient. . . .

But Dumbledore had overestimated him. He had failed: The snake survived. One Horcrux remained to bind Voldemort to the earth, even after Harry had been killed. True, that would mean an easier job for somebody. He wondered who would do it . . . Ron and Hermione would know what needed to be done, of course. . . . That would have been why Dumbledore wanted him to confide in two others . . . so that if he fulfilled his true destiny a little early, they could carry on. . . .

Like rain on a cold window, these thoughts pattered against the hard surface of the incontrovertible truth, which was that he must die.

I must die. It must end.

Ron and Hermione seemed a long way away, in a far-off country; he felt as though he had parted from them long ago. There would be no good-byes and no explanations, he was determined of that. This was a journey they could not take together, and the attempts they would make to stop him would waste valuable time. He looked down at the battered gold watch he had received on his seventeenth birthday. Nearly half of the hour allotted by Voldemort for his surrender had elapsed.

He stood up. His heart was leaping against his ribs like a frantic bird. Perhaps it knew it had little time left, perhaps it was determined to fulfill a lifetime's beats before the end. He did not look back as he closed the office door.

The castle was empty. He felt ghostly striding through it alone, as if he had already died. The portrait people were still missing from their frames; the whole place was eerily still, as if all its remaining lifeblood were concentrated in the Great Hall where the dead and the mourners were crammed.

Harry pulled the Invisibility Cloak over himself and descended through the floors, at last walking down the marble staircase into the entrance hall. Perhaps some tiny part of him hoped to be sensed, to be seen, to be stopped, but the Cloak was, as ever, impenetrable, perfect, and he reached the front doors easily.

Then Neville nearly walked into him. He was one half of a pair that was carrying a body in from the grounds. Harry glanced down and felt another dull blow to his stomach: Colin Creevey, though underage, must have sneaked back just as Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle

had done. He was tiny in death.

"You know what? I can manage him alone, Neville," said Oliver Wood, and he heaved Colin over his shoulder in a fireman's lift and carried him into the Great Hall.

Neville leaned against the door frame for a moment and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He looked like an old man. Then he set off down the steps again into the darkness to recover more bodies.

Harry took one glance back at the entrance of the Great Hall. People were moving around, trying to comfort each other, drinking, kneeling beside the dead, but he could not see any of the people he loved, no hint of Hermione, Ron, Ginny, or any of the other Weasleys, no Luna. He felt he would have given all the time remaining to him for just one last look at them; but then, would he ever have the strength to stop looking? It was better like this.

He moved down the steps and out into the darkness. It was nearly four in the morning, and the deathly stillness of the grounds felt as though they were holding their breath, waiting to see whether he could do what he must.

Harry moved toward Neville, who was bending over another body.

"Neville."

"Blimey, Harry, you nearly gave me heart failure!"

Harry had pulled off the Cloak: The idea had come to him out of nowhere, born out of a desire to make absolutely sure.

"Where are you going, alone?" Neville asked suspiciously.

"It's all part of the plan," said Harry. "There's something I've got

to do. Listen — Neville —"

"Harry!" Neville looked suddenly scared. "Harry, you're not thinking of handing yourself over?"

"No," Harry lied easily. "'Course not . . . this is something else. But I might be out of sight for a while. You know Voldemort's snake, Neville? He's got a huge snake. . . . Calls it Nagini . . ."

"I've heard, yeah. . . . What about it?"

"It's got to be killed. Ron and Hermione know that, but just in case they —"

The awfulness of that possibility smothered him for a moment, made it impossible to keep talking. But he pulled himself together again: This was crucial, he must be like Dumbledore, keep a cool head, make sure there were backups, others to carry on. Dumbledore had died knowing that three people still knew about the Horcruxes; now Neville would take Harry's place: There would still be three in the secret.

"Just in case they're — busy — and you get the chance —"

"Kill the snake?"

"Kill the snake," Harry repeated.

"All right, Harry. You're okay, are you?"

"I'm fine. Thanks, Neville."

But Neville seized his wrist as Harry made to move on.

"We're all going to keep fighting, Harry. You know that?"

"Yeah, I —"

The suffocating feeling extinguished the end of the sentence; he could not go on. Neville did not seem to find it strange. He patted

Harry on the shoulder, released him, and walked away to look for more bodies.

Harry swung the Cloak back over himself and walked on. Someone else was moving not far away, stooping over another prone figure on the ground. He was feet away from her when he realized it was Ginny.

He stopped in his tracks. She was crouching over a girl who was whispering for her mother.

"It's all right," Ginny was saying. "It's okay. We're going to get you inside."

"But I want to go *home,*" whispered the girl. "I don't want to fight anymore!"

"I know," said Ginny, and her voice broke. "It's going to be all right."

Ripples of cold undulated over Harry's skin. He wanted to shout out to the night, he wanted Ginny to know that he was there, he wanted her to know where he was going. He wanted to be stopped, to be dragged back, to be sent back home. . . .

But he *was* home. Hogwarts was the first and best home he had known. He and Voldemort and Snape, the abandoned boys, had all found home here. . . .

Ginny was kneeling beside the injured girl now, holding her hand. With a huge effort Harry forced himself on. He thought he saw Ginny look around as he passed, and wondered whether she had sensed someone walking nearby, but he did not speak, and he did not look back.

Hagrid's hut loomed out of the darkness. There were no lights, no

sound of Fang scrabbling at the door, his bark booming in welcome. All those visits to Hagrid, and the gleam of the copper kettle on the fire, and rock cakes and giant grubs, and his great bearded face, and Ron vomiting slugs, and Hermione helping him save Norbert . . .

He moved on, and now he reached the edge of the forest, and he stopped.

A swarm of dementors was gliding amongst the trees; he could feel their chill, and he was not sure he would be able to pass safely through it. He had no strength left for a Patronus. He could no longer control his own trembling. It was not, after all, so easy to die. Every second he breathed, the smell of the grass, the cool air on his face, was so precious: To think that people had years and years, time to waste, so much time it dragged, and he was clinging to each second. At the same time he thought that he would not be able to go on, and knew that he must. The long game was ended, the Snitch had been caught, it was time to leave the air. . . .

The Snitch. His nerveless fingers fumbled for a moment with the pouch at his neck and he pulled it out.

I open at the close.

Breathing fast and hard, he stared down at it. Now that he wanted time to move as slowly as possible, it seemed to have sped up, and understanding was coming so fast it seemed to have bypassed thought. This was the close. This was the moment.

He pressed the golden metal to his lips and whispered, “I am about to die.”

The metal shell broke open. He lowered his shaking hand, raised Draco’s wand beneath the Cloak, and murmured, *“Lumos.”*

The black stone with its jagged crack running down the center sat in the two halves of the Snitch. The Resurrection Stone had cracked down the vertical line representing the Elder Wand. The triangle and circle representing the Cloak and the stone were still discernible.

And again Harry understood without having to think. It did not matter about bringing them back, for he was about to join them. He was not really fetching them: They were fetching him.

He closed his eyes and turned the stone over in his hand three times.

He knew it had happened, because he heard slight movements around him that suggested frail bodies shifting their footing on the earthy, twig-strewn ground that marked the outer edge of the forest. He opened his eyes and looked around.

They were neither ghost nor truly flesh, he could see that. They resembled most closely the Riddle that had escaped from the diary so long ago, and he had been memory made nearly solid. Less substantial than living bodies, but much more than ghosts, they moved toward him, and on each face, there was the same loving smile.

James was exactly the same height as Harry. He was wearing the clothes in which he had died, and his hair was untidy and ruffled, and his glasses were a little lopsided, like Mr. Weasley's.

Sirius was tall and handsome, and younger by far than Harry had seen him in life. He loped with an easy grace, his hands in his pockets and a grin on his face.

Lupin was younger too, and much less shabby, and his hair was thicker and darker. He looked happy to be back in this familiar place, scene of so many adolescent wanderings.

Lily's smile was widest of all. She pushed her long hair back as she drew close to him, and her green eyes, so like his, searched his face hungrily, as though she would never be able to look at him enough.

"You've been so brave."

He could not speak. His eyes feasted on her, and he thought that he would like to stand and look at her forever, and that would be enough.

"You are nearly there," said James. "Very close. We are . . . so proud of you."

"Does it hurt?"

The childish question had fallen from Harry's lips before he could stop it.

"Dying? Not at all," said Sirius. "Quicker and easier than falling asleep."

"And he will want it to be quick. He wants it over," said Lupin.

"I didn't want you to die," Harry said. These words came without his volition. "Any of you. I'm sorry —"

He addressed Lupin more than any of them, beseeching him.

"— right after you'd had your son . . . Remus, I'm sorry —"

"I am sorry too," said Lupin. "Sorry I will never know him . . . but he will know why I died and I hope he will understand. I was trying to make a world in which he could live a happier life."

A chilly breeze that seemed to emanate from the heart of the forest lifted the hair at Harry's brow. He knew that they would not tell him to go, that it would have to be his decision.

"You'll stay with me?"

"Until the very end," said James.

"They won't be able to see you?" asked Harry.

"We are part of you," said Sirius. "Invisible to anyone else."

Harry looked at his mother.

"Stay close to me," he said quietly.

And he set off. The dementors' chill did not overcome him; he passed through it with his companions, and they acted like Patronuses to him, and together they marched through the old trees that grew closely together, their branches tangled, their roots gnarled and twisted underfoot. Harry clutched the Cloak tightly around him in the darkness, traveling deeper and deeper into the forest, with no idea where exactly Voldemort was, but sure that he would find him. Beside him, making scarcely a sound, walked James, Sirius, Lupin, and Lily, and their presence was his courage, and the reason he was able to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

His body and mind felt oddly disconnected now, his limbs working without conscious instruction, as if he were passenger, not driver, in the body he was about to leave. The dead who walked beside him through the forest were much more real to him now than the living back at the castle: Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and all the others were the ones who felt like ghosts as he stumbled and slipped toward the end of his life, toward Voldemort. . . .

A thud and a whisper: Some other living creature had stirred close by. Harry stopped under the Cloak, peering around, listening, and his mother and father, Lupin and Sirius stopped too.

"Someone there," came a rough whisper close at hand. "He's got an Invisibility Cloak. Could it be — ?"

Two figures emerged from behind a nearby tree: Their wands flared, and Harry saw Yaxley and Dolohov peering into the darkness, directly at the place Harry, his mother and father and Sirius and Lupin stood. Apparently they could not see anything.

"Definitely heard something," said Yaxley. "Animal, d'you reckon?"

"That head case Hagrid kept a whole bunch of stuff in here," said Dolohov, glancing over his shoulder.

Yaxley looked down at his watch.

"Time's nearly up. Potter's had his hour. He's not coming."

"And he was sure he'd come! He won't be happy."

"Better go back," said Yaxley. "Find out what the plan is now."

He and Dolohov turned and walked deeper into the forest. Harry followed them, knowing that they would lead him exactly where he wanted to go. He glanced sideways, and his mother smiled at him, and his father nodded encouragement.

They had traveled on mere minutes when Harry saw light ahead, and Yaxley and Dolohov stepped out into a clearing that Harry knew had been the place where the monstrous Aragog had once lived. The remnants of his vast web were there still, but the swarm of descendants he had spawned had been driven out by the Death Eaters, to fight for their cause.

A fire burned in the middle of the clearing, and its flickering light fell over a crowd of completely silent, watchful Death Eaters. Some of them were still masked and hooded; others showed their faces. Two giants sat on the outskirts of the group, casting massive shadows over the scene, their faces cruel, rough-hewn like rock. Harry saw

Fenrir, skulking, chewing his long nails; the great blond Rowle was dabbing at his bleeding lip. He saw Lucius Malfoy, who looked defeated and terrified, and Narcissa, whose eyes were sunken and full of apprehension.

Every eye was fixed upon Voldemort, who stood with his head bowed, and his white hands folded over the Elder Wand in front of him. He might have been praying, or else counting silently in his mind, and Harry, standing still on the edge of the scene, thought absurdly of a child counting in a game of hide-and-seek. Behind his head, still swirling and coiling, the great snake Nagini floated in her glittering, charmed cage, like a monstrous halo.

When Dolohov and Yaxley rejoined the circle, Voldemort looked up.

"No sign of him, my Lord," said Dolohov.

Voldemort's expression did not change. The red eyes seemed to burn in the firelight. Slowly he drew the Elder Wand between his long fingers.

"My Lord —"

Bellatrix had spoken: She sat closest to Voldemort, disheveled, her face a little bloody but otherwise unharmed.

Voldemort raised his hand to silence her, and she did not speak another word, but eyed him in worshipful fascination.

"I thought he would come," said Voldemort in his high, clear voice, his eyes on the leaping flames. "I expected him to come."

Nobody spoke. They seemed as scared as Harry, whose heart was now throwing itself against his ribs as though determined to escape the body he was about to cast aside. His hands were sweating as he

pulled off the Invisibility Cloak and stuffed it beneath his robes, with his wand. He did not want to be tempted to fight.

"I was, it seems . . . mistaken," said Voldemort.

"You weren't."

Harry said it as loudly as he could, with all the force he could muster: He did not want to sound afraid. The Resurrection Stone slipped from between his numb fingers, and out of the corner of his eyes he saw his parents, Sirius, and Lupin vanish as he stepped forward into the firelight. At that moment he felt that nobody mattered but Voldemort. It was just the two of them.

The illusion was gone as soon as it had come. The giants roared as the Death Eaters rose together, and there were many cries, gasps, even laughter. Voldemort had frozen where he stood, but his red eyes had found Harry, and he stared as Harry moved toward him, with nothing but the fire between them.

Then a voice yelled: "HARRY! NO!"

He turned: Hagrid was bound and trussed, tied to a tree nearby. His massive body shook the branches overhead as he struggled, desperate.

"NO! NO! HARRY, WHAT'RE YEH — ?"

"QUIET!" shouted Rowle, and with a flick of his wand Hagrid was silenced.

Bellatrix, who had leapt to her feet, was looking eagerly from Voldemort to Harry, her breast heaving. The only things that moved were the flames and the snake, coiling and uncoiling in the glittering cage behind Voldemort's head.

Harry could feel his wand against his chest, but he made no

attempt to draw it. He knew that the snake was too well protected, knew that if he managed to point the wand at Nagini, fifty curses would hit him first. And still, Voldemort and Harry looked at each other, and now Voldemort tilted his head a little to the side, considering the boy standing before him, and a singularly mirthless smile curled the lipless mouth.

"Harry Potter," he said very softly. His voice might have been part of the spitting fire. "The Boy Who Lived."

None of the Death Eaters moved. They were waiting: Everything was waiting. Hagrid was struggling, and Bellatrix was panting, and Harry thought inexplicably of Ginny, and her blazing look, and the feel of her lips on his —

Voldemort had raised his wand. His head was still tilted to one side, like a curious child, wondering what would happen if he proceeded. Harry looked back into the red eyes, and wanted it to happen now, quickly, while he could still stand, before he lost control, before he betrayed fear —

He saw the mouth move and a flash of green light, and everything was gone.

— HOOFSTUK VIER-EN-DERTIG —

Weer die Woud

Einde ten laaste, die waarheid. Terwyl hy met sy gesig vasgedruk lê in die stowwerige tapyt van die kantoor waar hy vroeër gedink het hy leer die geheime van oorwinning, verstaan Harry uiteindelik dat hy nie veronderstel is om te oorleef nie. Dit is sy werk om kalm in die Dood se verwelkomende arms in te stap. Langs die pad moes hy ontslae raak van Voldemort se oorblywende skakels met die lewe, sodat wanneer hy hom voor Voldemort neerwerp en nie 'n towerstaf lig om homself te verdedig nie, die einde skoon sal wees, en die werk wat in Godric's Hollow gedoen moes wees, afgehandel sal wees: nie een sal lewe nie, nie een kan oorlewe nie.

Hy voel sy hart wild in sy borskas klop. Hoe vreemd dat dit in sy vrees vir die dood al hoe harder pomp en hom heldhaftig aan die lewe hou. Maar dit sal moet ophou klop, en gou. Sy hart se slae is getel. Vir hoeveel meer sal daar tyd wees wanneer hy opstaan en vir die heel laaste keer deur die kasteel loop, uit oor die terrein en by die Woud in?

Verskrikking spoel oor hom terwyl hy op die vloer lê met daardie begrafnistrom wat binne-in hom rommel. Sal dit seer wees om dood te gaan? Al daardie kere dat hy gedink het dit is op die punt om te gebeur en dan ontsnap het, het hy nooit regtig aan die ding self gedink nie: sy wil om te lewe was altyd soveel sterker as sy vrees vir die dood. Maar dit kom nie nou by hom op om te probeer ontsnap, om vir Voldemort te vlug nie. Dit is verby, hy weet dit, en al wat oor is, is die ding self: om dood te gaan.

As hy maar net daardie someraand toe hy die laaste keer by Ligusterlaan No. 4 weg is, en die edele feniksveertowerstaf hom gered het, kon doodgegaan het! As hy maar net soos Hedwig kon doodgaan, so vinnig dat hy nie eens sal weet dit het gebeur nie! Of as hy homself maar net voor 'n towerstaf kon inslinger om iemand vir wie hy lief is, te red . . . Hy beny selfs nou sy ouers hulle dood. Hierdie koelbloedige wandeling na sy eie ondergang sal 'n ander

soort dapperheid verg. Hy voel sy vingers effens bewe en probeer hulle beheer, al kan niemand hom sien nie; die portrette teen die mure is almal leeg.

Stadig, baie stadig, sit hy regop, en toe hy dit doen, voel hy meer lewendig, meer bewus van sy eie lewende liggaam as ooit vantevore. Hoekom het hy nooit waardeer wat 'n wonderwerk hy is nie: brein en senuwees en polsende hart? Dit sal alles tot niet gaan . . . of eerder, hy sal daarvan afskeid neem. Sy asemhaling word stadig en diep, en sy mond en keel is heeltemal droog, maar so ook sy oë.

Dumbledore se verraad is amper onbenullig. Natuurlik was daar 'n groter plan; Harry was eenvoudig te onnosel om dit raak te sien, hy besef dit nou. Hy het nooit sy eie aanname dat Dumbledore hom aan die lewe wil hou, bevraagteken nie. Nou sien hy sy lewensduur was nog altyd bepaal deur hoe lank dit sou neem om al die Horcruxe te elimineer. Dumbledore het die taak om hulle te vernietig aan hom oorgedra, en hy het gehoorsaam aangehou om die bande los te maak wat nie net vir Voldemort nie, maar homself ook, aan die lewe vasbind! Hoe netjies, hoe elegant om geen verdere lewens meer te verkwis nie, maar om die gevaarlike taak te gee vir die seun wat alreeds gemerk is om geslag te word, en wie se dood nie 'n ramp sal wees nie, maar nog 'n hou teen Voldemort.

En Dumbledore het geweet Harry sal nie kop uittrek nie, dat hy tot die einde sal aanhou, selfs al is dit *sy* einde, want hy het moeite gedoen om hom te leer ken, het hy nie? Dumbledore het geweet, net soos Voldemort weet, Harry sal nie toelaat dat nog een mens vir hom doodgaan noudat hy ontdek het hy is by magte om dit stop te sit nie. Die beelde van Fred, Lupin en Tonks wat dood in die Groot Saal lê, dwing hulle aan sy geestesoog op, en hy kan vir 'n oomblik lank glad nie asemhaal nie: die Dood is ongeduldig . . .

Maar Dumbledore het hom oorskat. Hy het misluk: die slang het oorleef. Daar bly nog een Horcrux oor wat Voldemort met die aarde verbind, selfs nadat Harry doodgemaak is. Toegegee, dit sal iemand anders se werk makliker maak. Hy wonder wie dit sal doen . . . Ron en Hermione weet natuurlik wat gedoen moet word . . . Dit moet wees hoekom Dumbledore wou hê hy moet twee ander mense in sy vertroue neem . . . ingeval hy sy ware lotsbestemming effens te vroeg verwesenlik, kan hulle voortgaan . . .

Soos reën teen 'n koue venster kletter hierdie gedagtes neer op die harde oppervlak van die onbetwisbare waarheid, naamlik dat hy moet sterf. *Ek moet sterf.* Dit moet end kry.

Ron en Hermione voel baie ver weg, asof in 'n verafgeleë land; dit voel of sy en hulle weë lank gelede geskei het. Daar gaan nie 'n

gegroet en verduidelikings wees nie, neem hy homself vasberade voor. Dit is 'n reis hierdie wat hulle nie saam kan aanpak nie, en die pogings wat hulle sal aanwend om hom te keer, sal net kosbare tyd verspil. Hy kyk af na die gehawende goue horlosie wat hy op sy sewentiende verjaardag gekry het. Amper 'n halfuur van die tyd wat Voldemort hom gegee het om oor te gee, is verby.

Hy staan op. Sy hart spring soos 'n vasgekeerde voël teen sy ribbes vas. Miskien weet sy hart dit het min tyd oor, miskien is dit vasberade om voor die einde 'n leeftyd se hartkloppe te voltooi. Hy kyk nie terug toe hy die kantoor se deur agter hom toemaak nie.

Die kasteel is leeg. Hy voel soos 'n spook terwyl hy alleen daardeur stap, asof hy alreeds dood is. Die portretmense is steeds weg uit hulle rame; die hele plek is onheilspellend stil, asof sy oorblywende lewensbloed gekonsentreer is in die Groot Saal waar die dooies en treurendes saam ingeprop is.

Harry trek die Onsigbaarheidsmantel oor hom en beweeg by die verskillende verdiepings af en dan uiteindelik met die marmertrap tot in die Ingangsportaal. Miskien hoop 'n klein stukkie van hom iemand sal hom aanvoel, sien, stop, maar die Mantel is soos altyd ondeurdringbaar, perfek, en hy bereik die voordeure maklik.

Dan loop Neville amper in hom vas. Hy is een van twee wat 'n liggaam van buite af indra. Harry kyk vlugtig af en voel nog 'n dowwe hou in sy maag: Colin Creevey, hoewel minderjarig, moes teruggesluip het, net soos Malfoy, Crabbe en Goyle. Die dood laat hom klein lyk.

"Weet jy wat? Ek kan hom alleen dra, Neville," sê Oliver Wood, en hy hys Colin oor sy skouer soos 'n brandweerman iemand sal optel en dra hom by die Groot Saal in.

Neville leun 'n oomblik lank teen die deurkosyn en vee sy voorkop met die agterkant van sy hand af. Hy lyk soos 'n ou man. Dan beweeg hy weer by die trap af die donker in om nog liggame te gaan haal.

Harry kyk een keer terug na die Groot Saal se ingang. Mense maal rond, probeer mekaar troos, drink iets, kniel langs die dooies, maar hy sien nie enige van die mense vir wie hy lief is nie, geen teken van Hermione, Ron, Ginny of enige van die ander Weasleys of Luna nie. Hy voel hy sal al die tyd wat daar vir hom oorbly, gee in ruil vir net een laaste blik op hulle; maar sal hy dan ooit die krag hê om op te hou kyk? Dit is beter so.

Hy beweeg by die trap af, die duisternis in. Dit is amper vieruur in die oggend en die doodse stilte wat oor die terrein hang, laat hom

voel of die hele plek asem ophou en wag om te sien of hy kan doen wat hy moet doen.

Harry beweeg tot by Neville wat oor nog 'n liggaam afbuk.

"Neville."

"Demmit, Harry, jy't amper my hart laat staan!"

Harry trek die Mantel van hom af: die idee het hom uit die bloute te binne geskiet, gebore uit 'n begeerte om absoluut seker te maak.

"Waarheen gaan jy, so alleen?" vra Neville agterdogtig.

"Dis alles deel van die plan," sê Harry. "Daar's iets wat ek moet doen. Luister – Neville –"

"Harry!" Neville lyk skielik bang. "Harry, jy dink tog nie daaraan om jouself oor te gee nie?"

"Nee," lieg Harry maklik. "'tuurlik nie . . . Dit is iets anders. Maar ek mag dalk vir 'n rukkie verdwyn. Weet jy van Voldemort se slang, Neville? Hy't 'n yslike slang . . . Noem haar Nagini . . ."

"Ja, ek't so gehoor . . . Wat daarvan?"

"Sy moet doodgemaak word. Ron en Hermione weet dit, maar net ingeval hulle –"

Die aakligheid van daardie moontlikheid versmoor hom vir 'n oomblik, maak dit onmoontlik om aan te hou praat. Maar hy ruk hom weer reg: dit is uiters belangrik, hy moet soos Dumbledore wees, koelkop bly, seker maak daar is reserwes, ander wat kan aangaan. Toe Dumbledore dood is, het hy geweet drie mense weet nog van die Horcruxe; nou gaan Neville Harry se plek inneem: daar sal nog steeds drie wees wat die geheim deel.

"Net ingeval hulle – besig is – en jy die kans kry –"

"Om die slang dood te maak?"

"Om die slang dood te maak," herhaal Harry.

"Oukei, Harry. Jy's oukei, nè?"

"Ek's oukei. Dankie, Neville."

Maar Neville gryp sy pols toe Harry wil wegbeweeg.

"Ons gaan almal aanhou veg, Harry. Weet jy dit?"

"Ja, ek –"

Die benoude gevoel smoor die res van die sin, hy kan nie voortgaan nie. Neville vind dit blykbaar nie vreemd nie. Hy klop Harry op die skouer, los hom, en loop weg om na nog liggame te soek.

Harry gooi die Mantel weer oor homself en loop verder. Iemand anders beweeg 'n entjie daarvandaan en buig af oor nog 'n figuur wat op die grond lê. Hy is 'n paar tree van haar af toe hy besef dit is Ginny.

Hy steek in sy spore vas. Sy buk nou laer af oor die meisie wat fluisterend na haar ma roep.

"Toemaar," sê Ginny, "dis oukei. Ons gaan jou binnetoe vat."

"Maar ek wil *huis* toe gaan," fluister die meisie. "Ek wil nie verder veg nie!"

"Ek weet," sê Ginny en haar stem breek. "Dit gaan alles oukei wees."

Koue rillings beweeg in golwe oor Harry se vel. Hy wil in die naglug uitroep, hy wil hê Ginny moet weet hy is hier, hy wil hê sy moet weet waarheen hy gaan. Hy wil gestop word, teruggesleep word, terug huis toe gestuur word . . .

Maar hy *is* by die huis. Hogwarts was die eerste en beste tuiste wat hy geken het. Hy en Voldemort en Snape, die versaakte seuns, het almal hier 'n tuiste gevind . . .

Ginny kniel nou langs die beseerde meisie en hou haar hand vas. Met groot inspanning dwing Harry homself om aan te beweeg. Hy verbeel hom hy sien Ginny omkyk toe hy verbygaan en wonder of sy kan aanvoel iemand loop hier naby verby, maar hy praat nie, en hy kyk nie terug nie.

Hagrid se hut doem uit die duisternis op. Daar is geen ligte nie, geen geluide van Tande wat teen die deur opspring en hom blaffend verwelkom nie. Al daardie kuiertjies by Hagrid, en die glans van die koperketel op die vuur, en rotskoekies en reuselarwes, en sy groot, bebaarde gesig, en Ron wat slakke braak, en Hermione wat hom help om Norbert te red . . .

Hy beweeg verder en kom nou aan die rand van die Woud, en hy stop.

'n Swerm Dementors sweef tussen die bome deur; hy kan hulle koue kilheid aanvoel en hy is nie seker hy kan veilig daardeur beweeg nie. Hy het nie krag oor vir 'n Patronus nie. Hy kan sy eie bewerasie nie meer beheer nie. Dit is per slot van rekening nie maklik om dood te gaan nie. Elke sekonde dat hy asemhaal, die reuk van die gras, die koel lug op sy gesig, is so kosbaar: om te dink mense het jare en jare, tyd om te mors, soveel tyd dat dit verbysleep, en hy klou aan elke sekonde vas. Hy voel of hy nie kan voortgaan nie, maar weet terselfdertyd hy moet. Die lang spel is op 'n einde, die Snip is gevang, dit is tyd om terug aarde toe te kom . . .

Die Snip. Sy pap vingers vroetel vir 'n oomblik met die sakkie om sy nek en hy haal dit uit.

Ek ontsluit met die sluiting.

Hy haal hard en vinnig asem terwyl hy daarna staar. Noudat hy wil hê die tyd moet so stadig moontlik omgaan, is dit asof dit versnel, en begrip kom so vinnig asof dit denke verbygesteek het. Dit is die sluiting hierdie. Dit is die oomblik.

Hy druk die goue metaal teen sy lippe en fluister: "Ek is op die punt om te sterf."

Die metaaldop breek oop. Hy laat sak sy bewende hand, lig Draco se towerstaf onder die Mantel en prewel: "*Lumos.*"

Die swart steen met sy getande kraak wat deur die middel loop, sit in die twee helftes van die Snip. Die Opstandingsteen het al met die vertikale streep wat die Vlierstaf voorstel, langs gekraak. Die driehoek en sirkel wat die Mantel en die steen voorstel, is nog sigbaar.

En weer verstaan Harry, sonder dat hy hoef te dink. Dit maak nie saak dat hy hulle terugbring nie, want hy gaan binnekort by hulle aansluit. Hy gaan hulle nie regtig haal nie; hulle kom hom haal.

Hy maak sy oë toe en draai die steen in sy hand om, drie keer.

Hy weet dit het gebeur, want hy hoor sagte bewegings om hom asof brose liggame hulle voete versit op die grond aan die soom van die Woud wat vol takkies gestrooi lê. Hy maak sy oë oop en kyk rond.

Hulle is nóg spook nóg werklik vlees, hy kan dit sien. Hulle lyk baie soos die Riddle wat lank gelede uit die dagboek ontsnap het, en hy was 'n herinnering wat amper solied gemaak is. Hulle beweeg na hom toe, minder substansieel as lewende wesens, maar baie meer as spoke, en op elke gesig is daar dieselfde liefdevolle glimlag.

James is presies so lank soos Harry. Hy dra die klere waarin hy dood is: sy hare is onnet en deurmekaar, en sy bril sit effens skeef, net soos meneer Weasley s'n.

Sirius is lank en aantreklik, en baie jonger as wat Harry hom ooit in sy lewe gesien het. Hy gee lang hale met gemaklike grasie, sy hande in sy sakke, 'n grinnik op sy gesig.

Lupin is ook jonger, en baie minder verwaarloos, en sy hare is dikker en donkerder. Hy lyk bly om terug in hierdie bekende plek te wees, die toneel van soveel uitstappies as adolessent.

Lily se glimlag is die breedste van almal. Sy druk haar lang hare terug toe sy naby hom kom, en haar groen oë, baie soos syne, deurvors sy gesig hongerig asof sy nooit genoeg na hom gekyk sal kry nie.

"Jy was so dapper."

Hy kan nie praat nie. Hy verkyk hom aan haar, en hy dink hy sal graag vir ewig so na haar wil staan en kyk, en dit sal genoeg wees.

"Jy is amper daar," sê James. "Baie amper. Ons is . . . so trots op jou."

"Is dit seer?"

Die kinderlike vraag kom by Harry se mond uit voor hy dit kan keer.

"Om dood te gaan? Glad nie," sê Sirius. "Vinniger en makliker as om aan die slaap te raak."

"En hy sal wil hê dit moet gou gaan. Hy wil dit verbykry," sê Lupin.

"Ek wou nie hê jy moes doodgaan nie," sê Harry. Hierdie woorde kom onwillekeurig. "Nie een van julle nie. Ek's jammer –"

Hy praat meer met Lupin as enige van die ander, hy smeek hom. "– net nadat julle seun gebore is . . . Remus, ek's jammer –"

"Ek is ook jammer," sê Lupin. "Jammer ek sal hom nooit ken nie . . . maar hy sal weet hoekom ek dood is en ek hoop hy sal verstaan. Ek het 'n wêreld probeer skep waarin hy gelukkiger sal kan lewe."

'n Ysige bries wat voel of dit uit die hart van die Woud kom, lig die hare op Harry se voorkop. Hy weet hulle sal nie vir hom sê om te gaan nie, dit moet sy besluit wees.

"Sal julle by my bly?"

"Tot die bitter einde," sê James.

"Hulle sal julle nie kan sien nie?" vra Harry.

"Ons is deel van jou," sê Sirius. "Onsigbaar vir enigiemand anders."

Harry kyk na sy ma.

"Bly naby my," sê hy sag.

En hy betree die Woud. Die Dementors se kilheid oorweldig hom nie; hy stap daardeur saam met sy metgeselle, en hulle is soos 'n Patronus vir hom, en saam marsjeer hulle deur die ou bome wat naby aan mekaar groei, hulle takke verstrengel, hulle wortels knoetserig en geknoop onder sy voete. Harry hou die Mantel styf om hom vas in die donker en loop dieper en dieper die Woud in, met geen idee van waar presies Voldemort is nie, maar seker dat hy hom sal kry. Langs hom, so te sê geruisloos, loop James, Sirius, Lupin en Lily, en hulle teenwoordigheid is sy moed, die rede hoekom hy kan aanhou om een voet voor die ander te sit.

Sy liggaam en verstand voel nou vreemd losgemaak van mekaar, sy ledemate werk sonder bewuste opdrag, asof hy nie in beheer is van die liggaam wat hy binnekort gaan verlaat nie, maar 'n passasier. Die dooies wat langs hom deur die Woud stap, is nou vir hom baie meer werklik as die lewendes daar in die kasteel: Ron, Hermione, Ginny en al die ander voel soos skimme terwyl hy strompel en gly na die einde van sy lewe, na Voldemort toe . . .

'n Dowwe slag en 'n fluistering: 'n ander lewende wese het naby hom geroer. Harry stop onder die Mantel, loer rond, luister, en sy ma en pa, Lupin en Sirius stop ook.

"Iemand is daar," fluister 'n growwe stem. "Hy't 'n Onsigbaarheidsmantel. Is dit miskien –?"

Twee figure verskyn van agter 'n boom daar naby: hulle towerstawwe begin gloei, en Harry sien hoe Yaxley en Dolohof die donkerte in tuur, reguit na die plek waar Harry, sy ma en pa en Sirius en Lupin staan. Blykbaar kan hulle niks sien nie.

"Ek't definitief iets gehoor," sê Yaxley. "Dink jy dit was 'n dier?"

"Daai idioot van 'n Hagrid het 'n hele horde goed hier aangehou," sê Dolohof en loer oor sy skouer.

Yaxley kyk af na sy horlosie.

"Tyd's amper om. Potter het sy uur gehad. Hy kom nie."

"En hy was seker hy sou kom! Hy gaan nie gelukkig wees nie."

"Ons beter teruggaan," sê Yaxley. "Uitvind wat die plan nou is."

Hy en Dolohof draai om en loop dieper die Woud in. Harry volg hulle: hy weet hulle sal hom lei presies waarheen hy wil gaan. Hy kyk sywaarts, en sy ma glimlag vir hom, en sy pa knik bemoedigend.

Ná net 'n paar minute se stap sien Harry lig voor hom, en Yaxley en Dolohof loop in by 'n oopte wat Harry weet die plek is waar die monsteragtige Aragog vroeër gebly het. Die oorblyfsels van sy reuseweb is nog daar, maar die swetterjoel nasate wat hy voortgebring het, is deur die Doodseters uitgedryf om vir hulle saak te gaan veg.

Daar brand 'n vuur in die middel van die oopte en flikkerende lig val oor 'n groep doodstil, waaksame Doodseters. Party van hulle het nog hulle maskers en mantelkappe op, ander wys hulle gesigte. Twee reuse sit effens eenkant van die groep en gooi massiewe skaduwees oor die toneel, hulle gesigte wreed en ru soos rotse. Harry sien Fenrir, op die loer terwyl hy sy lang naels kou; die groot blonde Rowle druk-druk aan sy bloeiende lip. Hy sien Lucius Malfoy, wat verpletter en vreesbevange lyk, en Narcissa, wie se oë gesonke en beangs is.

Elke oog is vasgenael op Voldemort: hy staan met sy kop geboë, en sy wit hande is voor hom saamgevou oor die Vlierstaf. Hy kan maklik besig wees om te bid of anders om stilletjies te tel, en terwyl Harry roerloos aan die rand van die toneel staan, kom die absurde gedagte by hom op van 'n kind wat tel voor hy die ander wat wegkruip, gaan soek. Agter sy kop, krullend en kronkelend, sweef die groot slang Nagini in haar glinsterende, betowerde hok wat lyk soos 'n tamaai stralekrans.

Toe Dolohof en Yaxley weer by die kring aansluit, kyk Voldemort op.

"Geen teken van hom nie, my Heer," sê Dolohof.

Voldemort se uitdrukking verander nie. Dit lyk in die vuur se lig of die rooi oë brand. Stadig trek hy die Vlierstaf tussen sy lang vingers deur.

"My Heer –"

Bellatrix het gepraat: sy sit naaste aan Voldemort, gehawend, haar gesig effens bebloed, maar andersins ongedeerd.

Voldemort lig sy hand om haar stil te maak, en sy sê nie 'n woord verder nie, maar staar net met hartstogtelike aanbidding na hom.

"Ek het gedink hy sou kom," sê Voldemort in sy hoë, helder stem, sy oë op die dansende vlamme. "Ek het verwag hy sou kom."

Niemand praat nie. Hulle lyk almal net so bang soos Harry, wie se hart nou teen sy ribbes hamer asof dit vasberade is om te ontsnap uit die liggaam wat hy binnekort gaan versaak. Sy hande sweet terwyl hy die Onsigbaarheidsmantel aftrek en dit saam met sy towerstaf onder sy kleed indruk. Hy wil nie in die versoeking kom om te veg nie.

"Ek het my blykbaar . . . misgis," sê Voldemort.

"Jy het nie."

Harry sê dit so hard as wat hy kan, met al die krag wat hy bymekaar kan skraap: hy wil nie bang klink nie. Die Opstandingsteen glip tussen sy lam vingers uit, en uit die hoek van sy oog sien hy hoe verdwyn sy ouers, Sirius en Lupin terwyl hy vorentoe tree tot in die vuur se lig. Hy voel op hierdie oomblik niemand maak saak nie, behalwe Voldemort. Dit is nou net hulle twee.

Die illusie verdwyn so vinnig as wat dit gekom het. Die reuse brul terwyl die Doodseters saam regop kom, en daar is 'n hele paar gille, asemteue, selfs 'n gelag. Voldemort staan versteen, maar sy rooi oë het Harry gevind, en hy staar na Harry wat na hom toe beweeg, met niks anders as die vuur tussen hulle nie.

Dan skree 'n stem –

"HARRY! NEE!"

Hy draai skuins: Hagrid se arms en bene is vasgebind en sy lyf is aan 'n boom vasgemaak. Sy massiewe liggaam skud die blare bokant hom terwyl hy desperaat worstel.

"NEE! NEE! HARRY, WAT DOEN –?"

"STIL!" skree Rowle en lê Hagrid met 'n swaai van sy towerstaf die swye op.

Bellatrix, wat ook opgespring het, kyk gretig van Voldemort na Harry, haar bors deinend. Al wat beweeg, is die vlamme en die slang wat haar in die glinsterende hok agter Voldemort se kop opkrul en loskrul.

Harry voel sy towerstaf teen sy bors, maar hy wend nie 'n poging

aan om dit uit te haal nie. Hy weet die slang word te goed beskerm, hy weet as hy dit regkry om die towerstaf op Nagini te rig, sal vyftig vloeke hom eerste tref. En nog steeds kyk Voldemort en Harry na mekaar, en nou hou Voldemort sy kop effens skuins terwyl hy die seun betrag wat voor hom staan, en 'n besonder vreugdelose glimlag laat die liplose mond opkrul.

"Harry Potter," sê hy baie sag. Sy stem kan maklik deel van die sissende vuur wees. "Die seun wat bly leef het."

Nie een van die Doodseters roer nie. Hulle wag: alles wag. Hagrid spartel, Bellatrix is kortasem, en Harry dink onverklaarbaar aan Ginny, aan haar gloeiende gesig, aan die gevoel van haar lippe op syne –

Voldemort het sy towerstaf gelig. Sy kop is steeds gekantel, soos 'n nuuskierige kind wat wonder wat sal gebeur as hy voortgaan. Harry kyk in die rooi oë en wil hê dit moet nou gebeur, vinnig, terwyl hy nog kan staan, voor hy beheer verloor, voor hy vrees wys –

Hy sien die mond beweeg en 'n groen ligstraal flits, en dan is alles weg.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



KING'S CROSS

He lay facedown, listening to the silence. He was perfectly alone. Nobody was watching. Nobody else was there. He was not perfectly sure that he was there himself.

A long time later, or maybe no time at all, it came to him that he must exist, must be more than disembodied thought, because he was lying, definitely lying, on some surface. Therefore he had a sense of touch, and the thing against which he lay existed too.

Almost as soon as he had reached this conclusion, Harry became conscious that he was naked. Convinced as he was of his total solitude, this did not concern him, but it did intrigue him slightly. He wondered whether, as he could feel, he would be able to see. In opening them, he discovered that he had eyes.

He lay in a bright mist, though it was not like mist he had ever experienced before. His surroundings were not hidden by cloudy vapor; rather the cloudy vapor had not yet formed into surroundings. The floor on which he lay seemed to be white, neither warm nor cold, but simply there, a flat, blank something on which to be.

He sat up. His body appeared unscathed. He touched his face. He was not wearing glasses anymore.

Then a noise reached him through the unformed nothingness that surrounded him: the small soft thumpings of something that flapped, flailed, and struggled. It was a pitiful noise, yet also slightly indecent. He had the uncomfortable feeling that he was eavesdropping on something furtive, shameful.

For the first time, he wished he were clothed.

Barely had the wish formed in his head than robes appeared a short distance away. He took them and pulled them on: They were soft, clean, and warm. It was extraordinary how they had appeared, just like that, the moment he had wanted them. . . .

He stood up, looking around. Was he in some great Room of Requirement? The longer he looked, the more there was to see. A great domed glass roof glittered high above him in sunlight. Perhaps it was a palace. All was hushed and still, except for those odd thumping and whimpering noises coming from somewhere close by in the mist. . . .

Harry turned slowly on the spot, and his surroundings seemed to invent themselves before his eyes. A wide-open space, bright and clean, a hall larger by far than the Great Hall, with that clear, domed glass ceiling. It was quite empty. He was the only person there,

except for —

He recoiled. He had spotted the thing that was making the noises. It had the form of a small, naked child, curled on the ground, its skin raw and rough, flayed-looking, and it lay shuddering under a seat where it had been left, unwanted, stuffed out of sight, struggling for breath.

He was afraid of it. Small and fragile and wounded though it was, he did not want to approach it. Nevertheless he drew slowly nearer, ready to jump back at any moment. Soon he stood near enough to touch it, yet he could not bring himself to do it. He felt like a coward. He ought to comfort it, but it repulsed him.

"You cannot help."

He spun around. Albus Dumbledore was walking toward him, sprightly and upright, wearing sweeping robes of midnight blue.

"Harry." He spread his arms wide, and his hands were both whole and white and undamaged. "You wonderful boy. You brave, brave man. Let us walk."

Stunned, Harry followed as Dumbledore strode away from where the flayed child lay whimpering, leading him to two seats that Harry had not previously noticed, set some distance away under that high, sparkling ceiling. Dumbledore sat down in one of them, and Harry fell into the other, staring at his old headmaster's face. Dumbledore's long silver hair and beard, the piercingly blue eyes behind half-moon spectacles, the crooked nose: Everything was as he had remembered it. And yet . . .

"But you're dead," said Harry.

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore matter-of-factly.

"Then . . . I'm dead too?"

"Ah," said Dumbledore, smiling still more broadly. "That is the question, isn't it? On the whole, dear boy, I think not."

They looked at each other, the old man still beaming.

"Not?" repeated Harry.

"Not," said Dumbledore.

"But . . ." Harry raised his hand instinctively toward the lightning scar. It did not seem to be there. "But I should have died — I didn't defend myself! I meant to let him kill me!"

"And that," said Dumbledore, "will, I think, have made all the difference."

Happiness seemed to radiate from Dumbledore like light, like fire: Harry had never seen the man so utterly, so palpably content.

"Explain," said Harry.

"But you already know," said Dumbledore. He twiddled his thumbs together.

"I let him kill me," said Harry. "Didn't I?"

"You did," said Dumbledore, nodding. "Go on!"

"So the part of his soul that was in me . . ."

Dumbledore nodded still more enthusiastically, urging Harry onward, a broad smile of encouragement on his face.

". . . has it gone?"

"Oh yes!" said Dumbledore. "Yes, he destroyed it. Your soul is whole, and completely your own, Harry."

"But then . . ."

Harry glanced over his shoulder to where the small, maimed

creature trembled under the chair.

"What is that, Professor?"

"Something that is beyond either of our help," said Dumbledore.

"But if Voldemort used the Killing Curse," Harry started again, "and nobody died for me this time — how can I be alive?"

"I think you know," said Dumbledore. "Think back. Remember what he did, in his ignorance, in his greed and his cruelty."

Harry thought. He let his gaze drift over his surroundings. If it was indeed a palace in which they sat, it was an odd one, with chairs set in little rows and bits of railing here and there, and still, he and Dumbledore and the stunted creature under the chair were the only beings there. Then the answer rose to his lips easily, without effort.

"He took my blood," said Harry.

"Precisely!" said Dumbledore. "He took your blood and rebuilt his living body with it! Your blood in his veins, Harry, Lily's protection inside both of you! He tethered you to life while he lives!"

"I live . . . while he lives? But I thought . . . I thought it was the other way round! I thought we both had to die? Or is it the same thing?"

He was distracted by the whimpering and thumping of the agonized creature behind them and glanced back at it yet again.

"Are you sure we can't do anything?"

"There is no help possible."

"Then explain . . . more," said Harry, and Dumbledore smiled.

"You were the seventh Horcrux, Harry, the Horcrux he never meant to make. He had rendered his soul so unstable that it broke apart when he committed those acts of unspeakable evil, the murder of your

parents, the attempted killing of a child. But what escaped from that room was even less than he knew. He left more than his body behind. He left part of himself latched to you, the would-be victim who had survived.

"And his knowledge remained woefully incomplete, Harry! That which Voldemort does not value, he takes no trouble to comprehend. Of house-elves and children's tales, of love, loyalty, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. *Nothing*. That they all have a power beyond his own, a power beyond the reach of any magic, is a truth he has never grasped.

"He took your blood believing it would strengthen him. He took into his body a tiny part of the enchantment your mother laid upon you when she died for you. His body keeps her sacrifice alive, and while that enchantment survives, so do you and so does Voldemort's one last hope for himself."

Dumbledore smiled at Harry, and Harry stared at him.

"And you knew this? You knew — all along?"

"I guessed. But my guesses have usually been good," said Dumbledore happily, and they sat in silence for what seemed like a long time, while the creature behind them continued to whimper and tremble.

"There's more," said Harry. "There's more to it. Why did my wand break the wand he borrowed?"

"As to that, I cannot be sure."

"Have a guess, then," said Harry, and Dumbledore laughed.

"What you must understand, Harry, is that you and Lord Voldemort have journeyed together into realms of magic hitherto unknown and

untested. But here is what I think happened, and it is unprecedented, and no wandmaker could, I think, ever have predicted it or explained it to Voldemort.

"Without meaning to, as you now know, Lord Voldemort doubled the bond between you when he returned to a human form. A part of his soul was still attached to yours, and, thinking to strengthen himself, he took a part of your mother's sacrifice into himself. If he could only have understood the precise and terrible power of that sacrifice, he would not, perhaps, have dared to touch your blood. . . . But then, if he had been able to understand, he could not be Lord Voldemort, and might never have murdered at all.

"Having ensured this two-fold connection, having wrapped your destinies together more securely than ever two wizards were joined in history, Voldemort proceeded to attack you with a wand that shared a core with yours. And now something very strange happened, as we know. The cores reacted in a way that Lord Voldemort, who never knew that your wand was twin of his, had never expected.

"He was more afraid than you were that night, Harry. You had accepted, even embraced, the possibility of death, something Lord Voldemort has never been able to do. Your courage won, your wand overpowered his. And in doing so, something happened between those wands, something that echoed the relationship between their masters.

"I believe that your wand imbibed some of the power and qualities of Voldemort's wand that night, which is to say that it contained a little of Voldemort himself. So your wand recognized him when he pursued you, recognized a man who was both kin and mortal enemy,

and it regurgitated some of his own magic against him, magic much more powerful than anything Lucius's wand had ever performed. Your wand now contained the power of your enormous courage and of Voldemort's own deadly skill: What chance did that poor stick of Lucius Malfoy's stand?"

"But if my wand was so powerful, how come Hermione was able to break it?" asked Harry.

"My dear boy, its remarkable effects were directed only at Voldemort, who had tampered so ill-advisedly with the deepest laws of magic. Only toward him was that wand abnormally powerful. Otherwise it was a wand like any other . . . though a good one, I am sure," Dumbledore finished kindly.

Harry sat in thought for a long time, or perhaps seconds. It was very hard to be sure of things like time, here.

"He killed me with your wand."

"He *failed* to kill you with my wand," Dumbledore corrected Harry. "I think we can agree that you are not dead — though, of course," he added, as if fearing he had been discourteous, "I do not minimize your sufferings, which I am sure were severe."

"I feel great at the moment, though," said Harry, looking down at his clean, unblemished hands. "Where are we, exactly?"

"Well, I was going to ask you that," said Dumbledore, looking around. "Where would you say that we are?"

Until Dumbledore had asked, Harry had not known. Now, however, he found that he had an answer ready to give.

"It looks," he said slowly, "like King's Cross station. Except a lot cleaner and empty, and there are no trains as far as I can see."

“King’s Cross station!” Dumbledore was chuckling immoderately. “Good gracious, really?”

“Well, where do you think we are?” asked Harry, a little defensively.

“My dear boy, I have no idea. This is, as they say, *your* party.”

Harry had no idea what this meant; Dumbledore was being infuriating. He glared at him, then remembered a much more pressing question than that of their current location.

“The Deathly Hallows,” he said, and he was glad to see that the words wiped the smile from Dumbledore’s face.

“Ah, yes,” he said. He even looked a little worried.

“Well?”

For the first time since Harry had met Dumbledore, he looked less than an old man, much less. He looked fleetingly like a small boy caught in wrongdoing.

“Can you forgive me?” he said. “Can you forgive me for not trusting you? For not telling you? Harry, I only feared that you would fail as I had failed. I only dreaded that you would make my mistakes. I crave your pardon, Harry. I have known, for some time now, that you are the better man.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Harry, startled by Dumbledore’s tone, by the sudden tears in his eyes.

“The Hallows, the Hallows,” murmured Dumbledore. “A desperate man’s dream!”

“But they’re real!”

“Real, and dangerous, and a lure for fools,” said Dumbledore. “And I was such a fool. But you know, don’t you? I have no secrets

from you anymore. You know."

"What do I know?"

Dumbledore turned his whole body to face Harry, and tears still sparkled in the brilliantly blue eyes.

"Master of death, Harry, master of Death! Was I better, ultimately, than Voldemort?"

"Of course you were," said Harry. "Of course — how can you ask that? You never killed if you could avoid it!"

"True, true," said Dumbledore, and he was like a child seeking reassurance. "Yet I too sought a way to conquer death, Harry."

"Not the way he did," said Harry. After all his anger at Dumbledore, how odd it was to sit here, beneath the high, vaulted ceiling, and defend Dumbledore from himself. "Hallows, not Horcruxes."

"Hallows," murmured Dumbledore, "not Horcruxes. Precisely."

There was a pause. The creature behind them whimpered, but Harry no longer looked around.

"Grindelwald was looking for them too?" he asked.

Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment and nodded.

"It was the thing, above all, that drew us together," he said quietly. "Two clever, arrogant boys with a shared obsession. He wanted to come to Godric's Hollow, as I am sure you have guessed, because of the grave of Ignotus Peverell. He wanted to explore the place the third brother had died."

"So it's true?" asked Harry. "All of it? The Peverell brothers —"

"— were the three brothers of the tale," said Dumbledore, nodding. "Oh yes, I think so. Whether they met Death on a lonely

road . . . I think it more likely that the Peverell brothers were simply gifted, dangerous wizards who succeeded in creating those powerful objects. The story of them being Death's own Hallows seems to me the sort of legend that might have sprung up around such creations.

"The Cloak, as you know now, traveled down through the ages, father to son, mother to daughter, right down to Ignotus's last living descendant, who was born, as Ignotus was, in the village of Godric's Hollow."

Dumbledore smiled at Harry.

"Me?"

"You. You have guessed, I know, why the Cloak was in my possession on the night your parents died. James had showed it to me just a few days previously. It explained much of his undetected wrongdoing at school! I could hardly believe what I was seeing. I asked to borrow it, to examine it. I had long since given up my dream of uniting the Hallows, but I could not resist, could not help taking a closer look. . . . It was a Cloak the likes of which I had never seen, immensely old, perfect in every respect . . . and then your father died, and I had two Hallows at last, all to myself!"

His tone was unbearably bitter.

"The Cloak wouldn't have helped them survive, though," Harry said quickly. "Voldemort knew where my mum and dad were. The Cloak couldn't have made them curse-proof."

"True," sighed Dumbledore. "True."

Harry waited, but Dumbledore did not speak, so he prompted him.

"So you'd given up looking for the Hallows when you saw the Cloak?"

“Oh yes,” said Dumbledore faintly. It seemed that he forced himself to meet Harry’s eyes. “You know what happened. You know. You cannot despise me more than I despise myself.”

“But I don’t despise you —”

“Then you should,” said Dumbledore. He drew a deep breath. “You know the secret of my sister’s ill health, what those Muggles did, what she became. You know how my poor father sought revenge, and paid the price, died in Azkaban. You know how my mother gave up her own life to care for Ariana.

“I resented it, Harry.”

Dumbledore stated it baldly, coldly. He was looking now over the top of Harry’s head, into the distance.

“I was gifted, I was brilliant. I wanted to escape. I wanted to shine. I wanted glory.

“Do not misunderstand me,” he said, and pain crossed the face so that he looked ancient again. “I loved them. I loved my parents, I loved my brother and my sister, but I was selfish, Harry, more selfish than you, who are a remarkably selfless person, could possibly imagine.

“So that, when my mother died, and I was left the responsibility of a damaged sister and a wayward brother, I returned to my village in anger and bitterness. Trapped and wasted, I thought! And then, of course, he came. . . .”

Dumbledore looked directly into Harry’s eyes again.

“Grindelwald. You cannot imagine how his ideas caught me, Harry, inflamed me. Muggles forced into subservience. We wizards triumphant. Grindelwald and I, the glorious young leaders of the

revolution.

"Oh, I had a few scruples. I assuaged my conscience with empty words. It would all be for the greater good, and any harm done would be repaid a hundredfold in benefits for wizards. Did I know, in my heart of hearts, what Gellert Grindelwald was? I think I did, but I closed my eyes. If the plans we were making came to fruition, all my dreams would come true.

"And at the heart of our schemes, the Deathly Hallows! How they fascinated him, how they fascinated both of us! The unbeatable wand, the weapon that would lead us to power! The Resurrection Stone — to him, though I pretended not to know it, it meant an army of Inferi! To me, I confess, it meant the return of my parents, and the lifting of all responsibility from my shoulders.

"And the Cloak . . . somehow, we never discussed the Cloak much, Harry. Both of us could conceal ourselves well enough without the Cloak, the true magic of which, of course, is that it can be used to protect and shield others as well as its owner. I thought that, if we ever found it, it might be useful in hiding Ariana, but our interest in the Cloak was mainly that it completed the trio, for the legend said that the man who united all three objects would then be truly master of death, which we took to mean 'invincible.'

"Invincible masters of death, Grindelwald and Dumbledore! Two months of insanity, of cruel dreams, and neglect of the only two members of my family left to me.

"And then . . . you know what happened. Reality returned in the form of my rough, unlettered, and infinitely more admirable brother. I did not want to hear the truths he shouted at me. I did not want to hear

that I could not set forth to seek Hallows with a fragile and unstable sister in tow.

"The argument became a fight. Grindelwald lost control. That which I had always sensed in him, though I pretended not to, now sprang into terrible being. And Ariana . . . after all my mother's care and caution . . . lay dead upon the floor."

Dumbledore gave a little gasp and began to cry in earnest. Harry reached out and was glad to find that he could touch him: He gripped his arm tightly and Dumbledore gradually regained control.

"Well, Grindelwald fled, as anyone but I could have predicted. He vanished, with his plans for seizing power, and his schemes for Muggle torture, and his dreams of the Deathly Hallows, dreams in which I had encouraged him and helped him. He ran, while I was left to bury my sister, and learn to live with my guilt and my terrible grief, the price of my shame.

"Years passed. There were rumors about him. They said he had procured a wand of immense power. I, meanwhile, was offered the post of Minister of Magic, not once, but several times. Naturally, I refused. I had learned that I was not to be trusted with power."

"But you'd have been better, much better, than Fudge or Scrimgeour!" burst out Harry.

"Would I?" asked Dumbledore heavily. "I am not so sure. I had proven, as a very young man, that power was my weakness and my temptation. It is a curious thing, Harry, but perhaps those who are best suited to power are those who have never sought it. Those who, like you, have leadership thrust upon them, and take up the mantle because they must, and find to their own surprise that they wear it

well.

"I was safer at Hogwarts. I think I was a good teacher —"

"You were the best —"

"— you are very kind, Harry. But while I busied myself with the training of young wizards, Grindelwald was raising an army. They say he feared me, and perhaps he did, but less, I think, than I feared him.

"Oh, not death," said Dumbledore, in answer to Harry's questioning look. "Not what he could do to me magically. I knew that we were evenly matched, perhaps that I was a shade more skillful. It was the truth I feared. You see, I never knew which of us, in that last, horrific fight, had actually cast the curse that killed my sister. You may call me cowardly: You would be right. Harry, I dreaded beyond all things the knowledge that it had been I who brought about her death, not merely through my arrogance and stupidity, but that I actually struck the blow that snuffed out her life.

"I think he knew it, I think he knew what frightened me. I delayed meeting him until finally, it would have been too shameful to resist any longer. People were dying and he seemed unstoppable, and I had to do what I could.

"Well, you know what happened next. I won the duel. I won the wand."

Another silence. Harry did not ask whether Dumbledore had ever found out who struck Ariana dead. He did not want to know, and even less did he want Dumbledore to have to tell him. At last he knew what Dumbledore would have seen when he looked in the Mirror of Erised, and why Dumbledore had been so understanding of

the fascination it had exercised over Harry.

They sat in silence for a long time, and the whimperings of the creature behind them barely disturbed Harry anymore.

At last he said, "Grindelwald tried to stop Voldemort going after the wand. He lied, you know, pretended he had never had it."

Dumbledore nodded, looking down at his lap, tears still glittering on the crooked nose.

"They say he showed remorse in later years, alone in his cell at Nurmengard. I hope that it is true. I would like to think he did feel the horror and shame of what he had done. Perhaps that lie to Voldemort was his attempt to make amends . . . to prevent Voldemort from taking the Hallow . . ."

". . . or maybe from breaking into your tomb?" suggested Harry, and Dumbledore dabbed his eyes.

After another short pause Harry said, "You tried to use the Resurrection Stone."

Dumbledore nodded.

"When I discovered it, after all those years, buried in the abandoned home of the Gaunts — the Hallow I had craved most of all, though in my youth I had wanted it for very different reasons — I lost my head, Harry. I quite forgot that it was now a Horcrux, that the ring was sure to carry a curse. I picked it up, and I put it on, and for a second I imagined that I was about to see Ariana, and my mother, and my father, and to tell them how very, very sorry I was. . . .

"I was such a fool, Harry. After all those years I had learned nothing. I was unworthy to unite the Deathly Hallows, I had proved it time and again, and here was final proof."

"Why?" said Harry. "It was natural! You wanted to see them again. What's wrong with that?"

"Maybe a man in a million could unite the Hallows, Harry. I was fit only to possess the meanest of them, the least extraordinary. I was fit to own the Elder Wand, and not to boast of it, and not to kill with it. I was permitted to tame and to use it, because I took it, not for gain, but to save others from it.

"But the Cloak, I took out of vain curiosity, and so it could never have worked for me as it works for you, its true owner. The stone I would have used in an attempt to drag back those who are at peace, rather than to enable my self-sacrifice, as you did. You are the worthy possessor of the Hallows."

Dumbledore patted Harry's hand, and Harry looked up at the old man and smiled; he could not help himself. How could he remain angry with Dumbledore now?

"Why did you have to make it so difficult?"

Dumbledore's smile was tremulous.

"I am afraid I counted on Miss Granger to slow you up, Harry. I was afraid that your hot head might dominate your good heart. I was scared that, if presented outright with the facts about those tempting objects, you might seize the Hallows as I did, at the wrong time, for the wrong reasons. If you laid hands on them, I wanted you to possess them safely. You are the true master of death, because the true master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying."

"And Voldemort never knew about the Hallows?"

"I do not think so, because he did not recognize the Resurrection Stone he turned into a Horcrux. But even if he had known about them, Harry, I doubt that he would have been interested in any except the first. He would not think that he needed the Cloak, and as for the stone, whom would he want to bring back from the dead? He fears the dead. He does not love."

"But you expected him to go after the wand?"

"I have been sure that he would try, ever since your wand beat Voldemort's in the graveyard of Little Hangleton. At first, he was afraid that you had conquered him by superior skill. Once he had kidnapped Ollivander, however, he discovered the existence of the twin cores. He thought that explained everything. Yet the borrowed wand did no better against yours! So Voldemort, instead of asking himself what quality it was in you that had made your wand so strong, what gift you possessed that he did not, naturally set out to find the one wand that, they said, would beat any other. For him, the Elder Wand has become an obsession to rival his obsession with you. He believes that the Elder Wand removes his last weakness and makes him truly invincible. Poor Severus . . ."

"If you planned your death with Snape, you meant him to end up with the Elder Wand, didn't you?"

"I admit that was my intention," said Dumbledore, "but it did not work as I intended, did it?"

"No," said Harry. "That bit didn't work out."

The creature behind them jerked and moaned, and Harry and Dumbledore sat without talking for the longest time yet. The realization of what would happen next settled gradually over Harry

in the long minutes, like softly falling snow.

"I've got to go back, haven't I?"

"That is up to you."

"I've got a choice?"

"Oh yes." Dumbledore smiled at him. "We are in King's Cross, you say? I think that if you decided not to go back, you would be able to . . . let's say . . . board a train."

"And where would it take me?"

"On," said Dumbledore simply.

Silence again.

"Voldemort's got the Elder Wand."

"True. Voldemort has the Elder Wand."

"But you want me to go back?"

"I think," said Dumbledore, "that if you choose to return, there is a chance that he may be finished for good. I cannot promise it. But I know this, Harry, that you have less to fear from returning here than he does."

Harry glanced again at the raw-looking thing that trembled and choked in the shadow beneath the distant chair.

"Do not pity the dead, Harry. Pity the living, and, above all, those who live without love. By returning, you may ensure that fewer souls are maimed, fewer families are torn apart. If that seems to you a worthy goal, then we say good-bye for the present."

Harry nodded and sighed. Leaving this place would not be nearly as hard as walking into the forest had been, but it was warm and light and peaceful here, and he knew that he was heading back to pain and

the fear of more loss. He stood up, and Dumbledore did the same, and they looked for a long moment into each other's faces.

"Tell me one last thing," said Harry. "Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?"

Dumbledore beamed at him, and his voice sounded loud and strong in Harry's ears even though the bright mist was descending again, obscuring his figure.

"Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"

— HOOFSTUK VYF-EN-DERTIG —

King's Cross

Hy lê plat op sy gesig en luister na die stilte. Hy is heeltemal alleen. Niemand kyk na hom nie. Niemand anders is daar nie. Hy is self nie heeltemal seker hy is daar nie.

'n Lang ruk later, of miskien niks later nie, kom dit by hom op dat hy moet lewe, dat hy meer as liggaamlose denke moet wees, want hy lê definitief op die een of ander oppervlak. Met ander woorde hy het 'n tassin, en die ding waarop hy lê, bestaan ook.

Amper onmiddellik nadat hy tot hierdie gevolgtrekking gekom het, word Harry daarvan bewus dat hy kaal is. Oortuig dat hy totaal alleen is, pla dit hom nie, maar dit maak hom wel effens nuuskierig. Hy wonder of hy ook sal kan sien, aangesien hy kan voel. Hy maak sy oë oop en ontdek hy kan.

Hy lê in 'n helder mis, maar dit is nie soos mis wat hy al vantevore ervaar het nie. Sy omgewing word nie deur 'n wolkerige wasem verberg nie; die wolkerige wasem het eerder nog nie aan die omgewing gestalte gegee nie. Die vloer waarop hy lê, lyk wit, en is nóg warm nóg koud, maar eenvoudig daar: 'n plat, leë iets waarop jy kan bestaan.

Hy sit regop. Sy liggaam lyk ongedeerd. Hy raak aan sy gesig. Hy dra nie meer bril nie.

Dan bereik 'n geluid hom deur die ongevormde niksheid wat hom omring: die klein, sagte geklop van iets wat wriemel en worstel. Dit is 'n jammerlike geluid, maar ook effens onbetaamlik. Hy kry die ongemaklike gevoel dat hy iets wat iemand probeer wegsteek, iets skandaligs, afluister.

Hy wens vir die eerste keer hy is aangetrek.

Die wens het skaars in sy kop opgekom of 'n kleed verskyn 'n entjie van hom af. Hy neem dit en trek dit aan: dit is sag, skoon en warm. Dit is ongelooflik hoe dit verskyn het, sommer net so, die oomblik dat hy dit wou hê . . .

Hy staan op en kyk rond. Is hy in die een of ander groot Vertrek

van Vereistes? Hoe langer hy kyk, hoe meer is daar om te sien. 'n Groot glaskoepeldak skitter hoog bokant hom in die sonlig. Miskien is dit 'n paleis. Alles is gedemp en stil, afgesien van daardie vreemde klopgeluidjies en kermklankies wat van iewers naby uit die mis kom . . .

Harry draai stadig in die rondte en dit is asof sy omgewing voor sy oë begin vorm aanneem. 'n Wye, oop ruimte, helder en skoon, 'n saal baie groter as die Groot Saal, met daardie helder glaskoepelplafon. Dit is heeltemal leeg. Hy is die enigste persoon hier, afgesien van –

Hy deins terug. Hy het die ding wat die geluide maak, gesien. Dit het die vorm van 'n klein, naakte kindjie, opgekrul op die grond; sy vel is rou en skurf, asof dit afgeskuur is, en dit lê sidderend onder 'n sitplek waar dit agtergelaat is, weggegooi, verborge, hygend na asem.

Hy is bang daarvoor. Al is dit klein en broos en beseer, wil hy nie nader gaan nie. Maar hy loop nogtans stadig nader, gereed om enige oomblik terug te spring. Nie lank nie, of hy staan naby genoeg om daaraan te raak, maar hy kan homself nie sover kry om dit te doen nie. Hy voel soos 'n lafaard. Hy behoort dit te troos, maar dit is vir hom afstootlik.

"Jy kan nie help nie."

Hy swaai om. Albus Dumbledore stap op hom af, lewenskragtig en regop, in 'n swierige kleed van middernagblou.

"Harry." Hy maak sy arms wyd oop en sy hande is albei heel en wit en ongeskonde. "Jou wonderlike seun. Jou dapper, dapper man. Kom ons stap."

Harry volg verstom terwyl Dumbledore wegbeweeg van waar die beseerde kind lê en kerm; hy lei Harry na twee sitplekke wat hy nie voorheen opgemerk het nie, 'n ent verder onder die hoë, glinsterende dak. Dumbledore gaan sit op een van hulle, en Harry val op die ander een neer en staar na sy gewese skoolhoof se gesig. Dumbledore se lang silwer hare en baard, die deurpriemende blou oë agter die halfmaanbril, die krom neus: alles is soos wat hy dit onthou. Maar nogtans . . .

"Maar u is dood," sê Harry.

"O ja," sê Dumbledore, ongeërg.

"So dan . . . is ek ook dood?"

"A," sê Dumbledore en glimlag selfs nog breër. "Dit is die vraag, of hoe? In die algemeen beskou, my liewe seun, dink ek nie so nie."

Hulle kyk na mekaar; die ou man straal nog steeds.

"Nie?" herhaal Harry.

"Nie," sê Dumbledore.

"Maar . . ." Harry lig sy hand instinktief na die weerliglitteken. Dit is blykbaar nie meer daar nie. "Maar ek behoort te gesterf het – ek het myself nie verdedig nie! Ek wou hê hy moes my doodmaak!"

"En dit," sê Dumbledore, "meen ek, het die verskil gemaak."

Geluk straal uit Dumbledore soos lig, soos vuur: Harry het die man nog nooit so absoluut, so sigbaar tevrede gesien nie.

"Verduidelik," sê Harry.

"Maar jy weet reeds," sê Dumbledore. Hy speel met sy duime.

"Ek het toegelaat dat hy my doodmaak," sê Harry. "Het ek nie?"

"Jy het," sê Dumbledore knikkend. "Gaan aan!"

"So die deel van sy siel wat in my was . . ."

Dumbledore knik entoesiasties en moedig Harry met 'n breë glimlag aan om verder te gaan.

". . . is dit weg?"

"O ja!" sê Dumbledore. "Ja, hy het dit vernietig. Jou siel is heel, en geheel en al jou eie, Harry."

"Maar dan . . ."

Harry loer oor sy skouer na waar die klein, verminkte wese onder die stoel bibber.

"Wat is dit, Professor?"

"Iets wat nie ek of jy kan help nie," sê Dumbledore.

"Maar as Voldemort die Moordvloek gebruik het," begin Harry weer, "en niemand het dié keer vir my gesterf nie – hoe kan ek nog lewe?"

"Ek dink jy weet," sê Dumbledore. "Dink terug. Onthou wat hy gedoen het, in sy onkunde, in sy gierigheid en sy wreedheid."

Harry dink na. Hy laat sy oë oor alles om hom dwaal. As dit inderdaad 'n paleis is waarin hulle sit, is dit 'n eienaardige een, met stoele in kort rye en stukkies relings hier en daar, en nog steeds is hy en Dumbledore en die verpotte wese onder die stoel die enigstes hier. Dan kom die antwoord maklik na sy lippe toe, sonder inspanning.

"Hy het my bloed gevat," sê Harry.

"Presies!" sê Dumbledore. "Hy het jou bloed geneem en sy lewende liggaam weer daarmee opgebou! Jou bloed in sy are, Harry; Lily se beskerming binne-in julle albei! Hy het jou aan die lewe vasgebind terwyl hy lewe!"

"Ek lewe . . . terwyl hy lewe? Maar ek dog . . . ek dog dis andersom! Ek dog ons moet albei doodgaan? Of is dit dieselfde ding?"

Die worstelende wese agter hulle se gekerm en gespartel lei sy aandag af en hy kyk weer soontoe om.

"Is Professor seker daar is niks wat ons kan doen nie?"
"Dit is onmoontlik om te help."
"Nou verduidelik dan . . . nog meer," sê Harry en Dumbledore glimlag.
"Jy was die sewende Horcrux, Harry, die Horcrux wat hy nooit bedoel het om te skep nie. Hy het sy siel so onstabiel gemaak dat dit verbrokkel het toe hy daardie dade van onuitspreeklike boosheid gepleeg het: die moord op jou ouers, die poging tot moord op 'n kind. Maar wat uit daardie kamer ontsnap het, was selfs minder as wat hy geweet het. Hy het meer as sy liggaam agtergelaat. Hy het 'n deel van homself vasgeheg aan jou, die geoormerkte slagoffer wat oorleef het.
"En sy kennis het klaaglik onvolledig gebly, Harry! Voldemort doen nie moeite om die dinge wat hy nie na waarde ag, te begryp nie. Voldemort weet en verstaan niks van huiselwe en kinderverhale, van liefde, lojaliteit en onskuld nie. *Niks nie.* Die feit dat dit alles oor 'n mag baie sterker as syne beskik, 'n mag wat buite die bereik van enige towerkrag is, is 'n waarheid wat hy nooit gesnap het nie.
"Hy het jou bloed geneem en geglo dit sal hom sterker maak. Hy het 'n klein deeltjie van die betowering wat jou ma aan jou oorgedra het toe sy vir jou gesterf het, in sy liggaam opgeneem. Sy liggaam hou haar opoffering aan die lewe, en terwyl daardie betowering oorleef, sal jy ook, en so ook Voldemort se een laaste hoop vir homself."
Dumbledore glimlag vir Harry, en Harry staar na hom.
"En u het dit geweet? U het geweet – die hele tyd?"
"Ek het geraai. Maar my raaiskote was gewoonlik goed," sê Dumbledore in sy skik, en hulle sit in stilte vir wat na 'n baie lang tyd voel terwyl die wese agter hulle aanhou om te kerm en te bewe.
"Daar's meer," sê Harry. "Daar steek meer daaragter. Hoekom het my towerstaf die towerstaf wat hy geleen het, gebreek?"
"Daarvan is ek nie seker nie."
"Raai dan," sê Harry, en Dumbledore lag.
"Wat jy moet verstaan, Harry, is dat jy en die Heer Voldemort saam gereis het na terreine van die towerkuns wat tot dusver onbekend en ongetoets was. Maar hier is wat ek dink gebeur het, en dit is ongekend, en ek dink geen towerstafmaker kon dit ooit voorspel of aan Voldemort verduidelik het nie.
"Sonder dat hy dit bedoel het, soos jy nou weet, het die Heer Voldemort die verbintenis tussen julle dubbeld so sterk gemaak toe hy na 'n menslike vorm teruggekeer het. 'n Deel van sy siel was

steeds aan joune vasgeheg, en, met die gedagte dat dit hom sterker sou maak, het hy 'n deel van jou ma se opoffering in homself opgeneem. As hy net die presiese en geweldige mag van daardie opoffering kon verstaan, sou hy dit miskien nie gewaag het om aan jou bloed te raak nie . . . maar nou ja, as hy dit kon verstaan het, sou hy nie die Heer Voldemort kon gewees het nie, en dalk nooit moord gepleeg het nie.

"Nadat hy hierdie dubbele verbintenis verseker het, nadat hy julle lot nouer aan mekaar gekoppel het as wat twee towenaars nog ooit in die geskiedenis verbind was, het Voldemort voortgegaan en jou aangeval met 'n towerstaf wat 'n kern met joune deel. En soos ons weet, het daar toe iets baie eienaardigs gebeur. Die kerns het gereageer op 'n manier wat die Heer Voldemort, wat nooit geweet het jou towerstaf is 'n tweeling van syne nie, nooit verwag het nie.

"Hy was daardie aand banger as jy, Harry. Jy het die moontlikheid van doodgaan aanvaar, selfs met ope arms, en dis iets wat die Heer Voldemort nog nooit kon doen nie. Jou waagmoed het oorwin, jou towerstaf het syne baasgeraak. En sodoende het iets tussen daardie towerstawwe gebeur, iets wat die verhouding tussen hulle meesters weerspieël het.

"Ek glo jou towerstaf het daardie aand van die krag en eienskappe van Voldemort se towerstaf opgeneem, wat beteken dit het 'n bietjie van Voldemort self bevat. So jou towerstaf het hom herken toe hy jou agtervolg het, 'n man herken wat sowel 'n verwant as 'n dodelike vyand is, en dit het van sy eie towerkrag teen hom gebruik, towerkrag wat baie sterker was as enigiets wat Lucius se towerstaf ooit vermag het. Jou towerstaf het toe die mag van jou enorme moed en van Voldemort se eie dodelike vaardigheid bevat: watter kans het Lucius Malfoy se arme staf gehad?"

"Maar as my towerstaf so sterk was, hoekom kon Hermione dit breek?" vra Harry.

"My liewe seun, sy merkwaardige vermoëns was slegs gerig op Voldemort, wat so onbesonne was om met die diepste wette van die towerkuns te peuter. Daardie towerstaf was net teenoor hom so abnormaal sterk. Andersins was dit 'n towerstaf soos enige ander een . . . hoewel 'n goeie een, daarvan is ek seker," sluit Dumbledore vriendelik af.

Harry sit 'n lang ruk, of dalk net sekondes lank, ingedagte. Dit is baie moeilik om hier seker te wees van dinge soos tyd.

"Hy het my met u towerstaf doodgemaak."

"Hy het nie daarin geslaag om jou met my towerstaf dood te

maak nie," korrigeer Dumbledore vir Harry. "Ek dink ons kan saamstem dat jy nie dood is nie – hoewel ek natuurlik nie," voeg hy by, asof hy bang is hy was onbeleefd, "jou lyding geringskat nie, want ek is seker dit was akuut."

"Maar ek voel op die oomblik uitstekend," sê Harry en kyk af na sy skoon hande sonder letsels. "Waar presies is ons?"

"Wel, ek wou dit vir jou vra," sê Dumbledore en kyk rond. "Waar sou jy sê, is ons?"

Totdat Dumbledore gevra het, het Harry nie geweet nie. Nou kom hy egter agter hy het 'n antwoord gereed.

"Dit lyk," sê hy stadig, "soos King's Cross-stasie. Behalwe dat dit baie skoner is, en leër, en dat daar geen treine is sover ek kan sien nie."

"King's Cross-stasie!" Dumbledore verkneukel hom hieroor. "Goeie genugtig, regtig?"

"Wel, waar dink u is ons?" vra Harry effens verdedigend.

"My liewe seun, ek het nie 'n benul nie. Dit is, soos hulle sê, *jou* partytjie hierdie."

Harry het nie 'n benul wat dit beteken nie; Dumbledore begin hom nou irriteer. Hy gluur hom aan en onthou dan van 'n baie dringender vraag as waar hulle hulle op die oomblik bevind.

"Die Skatte van die Dood," sê hy, en is bly om te sien die woorde vee die glimlag van Dumbledore se gesig af.

"A, ja," sê hy. Hy lyk selfs effens bekommerd.

"Wel?"

Vir die eerste keer vandat Harry Dumbledore ontmoet het, lyk hy nie na 'n ou man nie, inteendeel. Hy lyk 'n oomblik lank soos 'n klein seuntjie wat betrap is terwyl hy kwaad doen.

"Kan jy my vergewe?" sê hy. "Kan jy my vergewe dat ek jou nie vertrou het nie? Jou nie vertel het nie? Harry, ek was bang jy sou misluk soos wat ek misluk het. Ek was bevrees dat jy my foute sou maak. Ek smeek jou om my te vergewe, Harry. Ek weet reeds 'n geruime tyd dat jy 'n beter mens is as ek."

"Waarvan praat Professor?" vra Harry ontsteld deur Dumbledore se stemtoon en die skielike trane in sy oë.

"Die Skatte, die Skatte," prewel Dumbledore. "'n Desperate man se droom!"

"Maar hulle bestaan regtig!"

"Inderdaad, en hulle's gevaarlik, en 'n versoeking vir idiote," sê Dumbledore. "En ek was so 'n idioot. Maar jy weet dit, nie waar nie? Ek het nie meer enige geheime vir jou nie . . . Jy weet."

"Wat weet ek?"

Dumbledore draai na Harry toe en trane glinster in sy skitterende blou oë.

"Meester van die dood, Harry, meester van die Dood! Was ek op die lange duur beter as Voldemort?"

"Natuurlik was u," sê Harry. "Natuurlik – hoe kan u so iets vra? U het nooit doodgemaak as u dit kon vermy nie!"

"Dis waar, dis waar," sê Dumbledore, en hy is soos 'n kind wat gerusstelling soek. "Nogtans het ek ook 'n manier gesoek om die dood te oorwin, Harry."

"Nie sy manier nie," sê Harry. Ná al sy woede teenoor Dumbledore is dit vreemd om hier onder die hoë, koepeldak te sit en Dumbledore teen homself te verdedig. "Skatte, nie Horcruxe nie."

"Skatte," prewel Dumbledore, "nie Horcruxe nie. Presies."

Daar is 'n pouse. Die wese agter hulle kerm, maar Harry kyk nie meer om nie.

"Het Grindelwald ook na hulle gesoek?" vra hy.

Dumbledore maak sy oë vir 'n oomblik toe en knik dan.

"Dit was wat ons na mekaar toe aangetrek het, meer as enigiets anders," sê hy sag. "Twee intelligente, arrogante seuns met 'n gedeelde obsessie. Hy wou na Godric's Hollow toe gaan, soos ek seker is jy geraai het, omdat Ignotus Peverell se graf daar is. Hy wou die plek verken waar die derde broer dood is."

"So dis waar?" vra Harry. "Die hele ding? Die Peverell-broers . . .?"

"– was die drie broers in die verhaal," sê Dumbledore knikkend. "O ja, ek dink so. Maar of hulle die Dood op 'n eensame pad raakgeloop het . . . Ek dink die drie broers was heel waarskynlik net begaafde, gevaarlike towenaars wat daarin geslaag het om daardie magtige voorwerpe te skep. Die storie dat dit die Dood se eie Skatte was, is volgens my die soort legende wat om sulke skeppings kon ontstaan het.

"Die Mantel, soos jy nou weet, is deur die eeue heen aangegee, van vader na seun, van moeder na dogter, tot by Ignotus se laaste lewende nasaat, wat net soos Ignotus in die dorp Godric's Hollow gebore is."

Dumbledore glimlag vir Harry.

"Ek?"

"Jy. Ek weet jy het geraai hoekom die Mantel die aand van jou ouers se dood by my was. James het dit 'n paar dae vantevore vir my gewys. Dit het baie van sy geheime kwaaddoenery op skool verklaar! Ek kon skaars glo wat ek sien. Ek het gevra of ek dit kan leen, om dit te ondersoek. Ek het lankal reeds my droom om die Skatte te verenig, prysgegee, maar ek kon dit nie weerstaan nie, kon

nie help om dit van nader te wil bekyk nie . . . Dit was 'n Mantel soos ek nog nooit teëgekom het nie, ontsaglik oud, perfek in elke opsig . . . en toe is jou pa dood, en ek het uiteindelik twee Skatte, net vir myself!"

Sy stemtoon is ondraaglik bitter.

"Maar die Mantel sou hulle nie gehelp het om te oorleef nie," sê Harry vinnig. "Voldemort het geweet waar my ma en pa was. Die Mantel sou hulle nie teen die Vloek kon beskerm nie."

"Dis waar," sug Dumbledore. "Dis waar."

Harry wag, maar Dumbledore praat nie, daarom por hy hom aan.

"So, toe u die Mantel sien, het u al opgehou om na die Skatte te soek?"

"O ja," sê Dumbledore flouerig. Dit is asof hy homself dwing om Harry in die oë te kyk. "Jy weet wat gebeur het. Jy weet. Jy kan my nie meer verag as wat ek myself verag nie."

"Maar ek verag u nie –"

"Wel, jy behoort," sê Dumbledore. Hy haal diep asem. "Jy ken die geheim agter my suster se swak gesondheid, wat daardie Moggels gedoen het, wat van haar geword het. Jy weet hoe my arme pa probeer wraak neem het, hoe hy die prys daarvoor betaal het en in Azkaban dood is. Jy weet hoe my ma haar lewe opgeoffer het om Ariana te versorg.

"Dit het my gegrief, Harry."

Dumbledore sê dit prontuit, sonder emosie. Hy kyk nou bo-oor Harry se kop die verte in.

"Ek was begaafd, ek was briljant. Ek wou ontsnap. Ek wou skitter. Ek wou roem verwerf.

"Moenie my verkeerd verstaan nie," sê hy, en die pyn op sy gesig laat hom weer stokoud lyk. "Ek was lief vir hulle. Ek was lief vir my ouers, ek was lief vir my broer en my suster, maar ek was selfsugtig, Harry, selfsugtiger as wat jy, wat 'n verstommend onbaatsugtige mens is, jou ooit sal kan indink.

"In so 'n mate dat ek, toe my ma dood is en ek verantwoordelikheid moes neem vir 'n beskadigde suster en 'n eiewys broer, vol woede en verbittering na my tuisdorp teruggekeer het. Ek het vasgevang en vermors gevoel! En toe kom hy natuurlik . . ."

Dumbledore kyk Harry weer vas in die oë.

"Grindelwald. Jy kan nie dink hoe sy idees my laat vlamvat, my opgesweep het nie, Harry. Moggels gedwing tot onderdanigheid. Ons towenaars wat triomfeer. Ek en Grindelwald, die luisterryke leiers van die rewolusie.

"O, ek het 'n paar bedenkings gehad. Ek het my gewete met leë woorde gesus. Dit sou alles vir almal se beswil wees, en enige skade wat aangerig word, sou honderdvoudig voor vergoed word deur die voordele wat towenaars daaruit sou put. Het ek in my hart der harte geweet wat Gellert Grindelwald was? Ek dink ek het, maar ek het my oë toegemaak. As die planne wat ons beraam het, verwesenlik sou word, sou al my drome waar word.

"En die kern van ons planne was die Skatte van die Dood! O, dit het hom gefassineer, dit het ons albei gefassineer! Die onoorwinlike towerstaf, die wapen wat ons tot oppermag sou lei! Die Opstandingsteen – al het ek voorgegee ek weet dit nie, het dit vir hom 'n leërmag van Inferi beteken! Ek moet erken, vir my het dit beteken my ouers sou terugkeer, en dat al die verantwoordelikhede dan van my skouers af sou wees.

"En die Mantel . . . om die een of ander rede het ons die Mantel nooit juis bespreek nie, Harry. Ons albei kon onsself goed genoeg versteek sonder die Mantel, waarvan die ware towerkrag natuurlik daarin lê dat dit sy eienaar sowel as ander kan beskerm en beskut. Ek het gedink as ons dit ooit kry, sal dit handig te pas kom om Ariana mee weg te steek, maar ons het hoofsaaklik in die Mantel belang gestel omdat dit die driestuks volledig sou maak, want volgens die legende sal die persoon wat al drie voorwerpe verenig dan waarlik meester van die Dood wees, wat vir ons beteken het ons sal onoorwinlik wees.

"Onoorwinlike meesters van die Dood, Grindelwald en Dumbledore! Twee maande van waansin, van wrede drome, en verwaarlosing van my enigste twee oorblywende familielede.

"En toe . . . Jy weet wat gebeur het. Realiteit het teruggekeer in die vorm van my ruwe, ongeletterde en beslis meer bewonderenswaardige broer. Ek wou nie die waarhede wat hy my toegesnou het, hoor nie. Ek wou nie hoor dat ek nie met 'n brose en onstabiele suster op sleeptou na die Skatte kon gaan soek nie.

"Die argument het in 'n geveg ontaard. Grindelwald het beheer verloor. Dit wat ek altyd in hom aangevoel het, hoewel ek voorgegee het ek het nie, het nou skielik aaklig na vore gekom. En Ariana . . . ná al my ma se versorging en voorsorg . . . het dood op die vloer gelê."

Dumbledore gee 'n snikkie en begin dan met mening te huil. Harry steek sy hand uit en is bly om uit te vind hy kan aan hom raak: hy gryp sy arm styf vas en Dumbledore kry geleidelik weer beheer oor homself.

"Wel, Grindelwald het gevlug, soos enigiemand behalwe ek sou

kon voorspel het. Hy't verdwyn, met sy planne om die mag oor te neem en sy voorneme om Moggels te martel, en sy drome oor die Skatte van die Dood, drome waarmee ek hom aangemoedig en gehelp het. Hy het gevlug, en ek is agtergelaat om my suster te begrawe en met my skuld te leer saamleef, en my verskriklike hartseer, die prys vir my oneer.

"Jare het verbygegaan. Daar was gerugte oor hom. Mense het gesê hy het 'n towerstaf met geweldige krag bekom. Ek is intussen die pos van Minister van Towerkuns aangebied, nie een keer nie, maar verskeie kere. Ek het dit natuurlik van die hand gewys. Ek het geleer ek kan nie met mag vertrou word nie."

"Maar u sou beter, baie beter, as Fudge of Scrimgeour gewees het!" bars Harry uit.

"Sou ek?" vra Dumbledore beswaard. "Ek is nie so seker nie. Ek het as 'n baie jong man bewys mag is my swakheid en my versoeking. Dit is eienaardig, Harry, maar miskien is diegene wat nooit mag nagejaag het nie, die beste geskik daarvoor. Diegene soos jy, aan wie leierskap opgedwing word en wat die mantel op hulle skouers neem omdat hulle moet, en tot hulle verbasing uitvind hulle dra dit met welslae.

"Ek was veiliger by Hogwarts. Ek dink ek was 'n goeie onderwyser –"

"U was die beste –"

"Dit is baie vriendelik van jou, Harry. Maar terwyl ek my met die opleiding van jong towenaars besig gehou het, het Grindelwald 'n weermag op die been gebring. Hulle sê hy het my gevrees, en miskien het hy, maar minder, dink ek, as wat ek hom gevrees het.

"O, nie die dood nie," sê Dumbledore in antwoord op Harry se vraende blik. "Nie wat hy towergewys aan my kon doen nie. Ek het geweet ons is mekaar se gelyke, miskien was ek 'n raps meer bedrewe. Dit was die waarheid wat ek gevrees het. Sien jy, ek het nooit geweet wie van ons het in daardie laaste, afgryslike geveg in werklikheid die vloek afgevuur wat my suster se dood gekos het nie. Jy kan my 'n lafaard noem en jy sal reg wees. Harry, ek was meer as enigiets anders doodbang om uit te vind dit was ek wat haar dood veroorsaak het, nie net deur my arrogansie en onnoselheid nie, maar dat ek in werklikheid die doodshou uitgedeel het wat haar lewe gekos het.

"Ek dink hy het dit geweet, ek dink hy het geweet wat my groot vrees was. Ek het uitgestel om hom te ontmoet totdat dit uiteindelik te skandalig sou wees om langer daarteen te skop. Mense was besig om te sterf en hy was skynbaar onkeerbaar, en ek moes doen wat ek kon.

"Wel, jy weet wat daarna gebeur het. Ek het die tweegeveg gewen. Ek het die towerstaf verower."

Nog 'n stilte. Harry vra nie of Dumbledore ooit uitgevind het wie Ariana die doodshou toegedien het nie. Hy wil nie weet nie, en hy wil nog minder hê Dumbledore moet verplig wees om hom te vertel. Hy weet oplaas wat Dumbledore sou gesien het as hy in die Spieël van Etreegeb moes kyk, en hoekom Dumbledore soveel begrip gehad het vir die bekoring wat dit vir Harry ingehou het.

Hulle sit lank in stilte, en die wese agter hulle se gekerm pla Harry nie eintlik meer nie.

Uiteindelik sê hy: "Grindelwald het probeer keer dat Voldemort die towerstaf gaan soek. Hy't gelieg, weet u, gemaak asof hy dit nooit gehad het nie."

Dumbledore knik en kyk af na sy skoot terwyl trane op die krom neus blink.

"Hulle sê hy het later jare berou getoon, alleen in sy sel in Nurmengard. Ek hoop dit is waar. Ek sal graag wil dink hy was vervul met afgryse en skaamte oor wat hy gedoen het. Miskien was daardie leuen aan Voldemort sy poging om daarvoor te vergoed . . . om te voorkom dat Voldemort die Skat bekom . . ."

". . . of miskien om te keer dat hy by u graf inbreek?" stel Harry voor, en Dumbledore vee die trane uit sy oë.

Na nóg 'n kort pouse sê Harry: "U het probeer om die Opstandingsteen te gebruik."

Dumbledore knik.

"Toe ek dit ontdek, ná soveel jare, begrawe in die Gaunts se verlate huis, die Skat wat ek die meeste van almal begeer het – hoewel ek dit in my jeug om totaal ander redes wou hê – het ek kop verloor, Harry. Ek het heeltemal vergeet dit was toe 'n Horcrux, dat die ring sekerlik 'n vloek sou dra. Ek het dit opgetel, en ek het dit aangesit, en my 'n sekonde lank verbeel ek gaan nou enige oomblik vir Ariana sien, en my ma, en my pa, en vir hulle vertel hoe ontsettend, ontsettend jammer ek is . . .

"Ek was so 'n idioot, Harry. In al daardie jare het ek niks geleer nie. Ek was onwaardig om die Skatte van die Dood te verenig, ek het dit keer op keer bewys, en hier was die finale bewys."

"Hoekom?" vra Harry. "Dit was tog net natuurlik! U wou hulle weer sien. Wat is verkeerd daarmee?"

"Miskien kan een mens in 'n miljoen die Skatte verenig, Harry. Ek was net geskik om die geringste van die drie te besit, die mins buitengewone. Ek was net geskik om die Vlierstaf te besit, en om nie daarmee te spog nie, en om nie daarmee dood te maak nie. Ek

is toegelaat om dit te tem en te gebruik, want ek het dit geneem, nie vir gewin nie, maar om ander daarteen te beskerm.

"Maar ek het die Mantel uit ydele nuuskierigheid geneem, daarom kon dit nooit vir my gewerk het soos wat dit vir jou, sy ware eienaar, werk nie. Ek sou die steen gebruik het om hulle wat in vrede rus, te probeer terugdwing, eerder as om my eie selfopoffering te bewerkstellig, soos jy gedoen het. Jy is die waardige eienaar van die Skatte."

Dumbledore streel Harry se hand, en Harry kyk op na die ou man en glimlag; hy kan dit nie verhelp nie. Hoe kan hy nou nog vir Dumbledore kwaad bly?

"Hoekom het u dit so moeilik gemaak?"

Dumbledore glimlag bewerig.

"Ek is bevrees ek het op juffrou Granger gereken om jou te vertraag, Harry. Ek was bang jou heethoofdigheid sou jou goeie hart domineer. Ek was bang as al die feite oor daardie verleidelike voorwerpe op een slag aan jou verskaf word, jy die Skatte dalk sal aangryp soos wat ek gedoen het, op die verkeerde tyd, om die verkeerde redes. As jy hulle in die hande sou kry, wou ek hê jy moet hulle veilig kan besit. Jy is die ware meester van die Dood, want die ware meester probeer nie van die Dood af wegvlug nie. Hy aanvaar dat hy moet doodgaan, en verstaan dat daar baie, baie erger dinge in die lewende wêreld is as om dood te gaan."

"En Voldemort het nooit van die Skatte geweet nie?"

"Ek dink nie so nie, want hy het nie die Opstandingsteen wat hy in 'n Horcrux verander het, herken nie. Maar selfs al het hy van hulle geweet, Harry, twyfel ek of hy in enigeen behalwe die eerste een belang sou gestel het. Hy sou nie gedink het hy het die Mantel nodig nie, en wat die steen betref, wie sou hy uit die dood wou terugbring? Hy vrees die dooies. Hy het nie lief nie."

"Maar u het verwag hy sal die towerstaf probeer soek?"

"Ek was seker hy sou probeer, van die oomblik dat jou towerstaf die oorhand oor Voldemort s'n in Little Hangleton se begraafplaas gekry het. Hy was aanvanklik bang dat jy hom verslaan het omdat jy meer bedrewe as hy is. Maar toe hy Ollivander ontvoer het, het hy van die tweelingkerns se bestaan uitgevind. Hy het gedink dit verduidelik alles. Nogtans het die geleende towerstaf niks beter teen joune gevaar nie! So in plaas daarvan dat Voldemort homself afgevra het watter eienskap dit in jou is wat jou towerstaf so sterk maak, oor watter talent jy beskik wat by hom ontbreek, het hy gaan soek na die een towerstaf wat volgens almal enige ander een sal oorwin. Die Vlierstaf het 'n obsessie by hom geword, 'n obsessie wat sy obsessie

met jou geëwenaar het. Hy glo die Vlierstaf het sy laaste swakheid uit die weg geruim en maak hom waarlik onoorwinlik. Arme Severus . . ."

"As u beplan het dat Snape u moet doodmaak, het u bedoel die Vlierstaf moet op die ou end syne wees?"

"Ek erken dit was my plan," sê Dumbledore, "maar dit het nie uitgewerk soos ek beplan het nie, het dit?"

"Nee," sê Harry. "Daardie deel het nie uitgewerk nie."

Die wese agter hulle gee 'n paar stuiptrekkings en kerm, en Harry en Dumbledore sit langer as tevore sonder om te praat. Die besef van wat volgende sal gebeur, dring in die lang minute stadig tot Harry deur, soos sneeu wat sag val.

"Ek moet teruggaan, nè?"

"Dit hang van jou af."

"Het ek 'n keuse?"

"O ja." Dumbledore glimlag vir hom. "Jy sê ons is by King's Cross? Ek dink as jy besluit om nie terug te gaan nie, kan jy . . . kom ons sê . . . op 'n trein klim."

"En waarheen sal dit my neem?"

"Verder," sê Dumbledore eenvoudig.

Weer stilte.

"Voldemort het die Vlierstaf."

"Dis waar. Voldemort het die Vlierstaf."

"Maar u wil hê ek moet teruggaan?"

"Ek dink," sê Dumbledore, "as jy kies om terug te gaan, is daar 'n kans dat hy vir goed van kant gemaak kan word. Ek kan dit nie belowe nie. Maar ek weet een ding, Harry, en dit is dat jy minder as hy te vrees het deur hierheen terug te keer."

Harry kyk weer vlugtig na die rou ding wat sidder en stik in die skaduwee onder die stoel in die verte.

"Moenie vir die dooies jammer voel nie, Harry. Voel jammer vir die lewendes, en bowenal, vir hulle wat sonder liefde lewe. Deur terug te gaan, kan jy dalk verseker dat minder siele vermink word, minder families uitmekaar geskeur word. As dit vir jou na 'n waardige doelwit klink, dan sê ons vir eers tot siens."

Harry knik en sug. Om van hierdie plek af weg te gaan, sal nie naastenby so moeilik wees soos wat dit was om by die Woud in te loop nie, maar dit is warm en lig en rustig hier, en hy weet hy gaan terug na pyn en die vrees vir meer verlies. Hy staan op en Dumbledore ook, en hulle kyk vir 'n lang oomblik in mekaar se oë.

"Sê vir my een laaste ding," sê Harry. "Is dit werklik? Of het dit alles net in my kop gebeur?"

Dumbledore kyk stralend na hom, en sy stem klink hard en sterk in Harry se ore, selfs al daal die helder mis weer neer en verberg sy liggaam.

"Natuurlik gebeur dit in jou kop, Harry, maar hoekom op aarde sal dit beteken dis onwerklik?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



THE FLAW IN THE PLAN

He was lying facedown on the ground again. The smell of the forest filled his nostrils. He could feel the cold hard ground beneath his cheek, and the hinge of his glasses, which had been knocked sideways by the fall, cutting into his temple. Every inch of him ached, and the place where the Killing Curse had hit him felt like the bruise of an iron-clad punch. He did not stir, but remained exactly where he had fallen, with his left arm bent out at an awkward angle and his mouth gaping.

He had expected to hear cheers of triumph and jubilation at his death, but instead hurried footsteps, whispers, and solicitous murmurs filled the air.

"My Lord . . . *my Lord* . . ."

It was Bellatrix's voice, and she spoke as if to a lover. Harry did not dare open his eyes, but allowed his other senses to explore his predicament. He knew that his wand was still stowed beneath his robes because he could feel it pressed between his chest and the ground. A slight cushioning effect in the area of his stomach told him that the Invisibility Cloak was also there, stuffed out of sight.

"My Lord . . ."

"That will do," said Voldemort's voice.

More footsteps: Several people were backing away from the same spot. Desperate to see what was happening and why, Harry opened his eyes by a millimeter.

Voldemort seemed to be getting to his feet. Various Death Eaters were hurrying away from him, returning to the crowd lining the clearing. Bellatrix alone remained behind, kneeling beside Voldemort.

Harry closed his eyes again and considered what he had seen. The Death Eaters had been huddled around Voldemort, who seemed to have fallen to the ground. Something had happened when he had hit Harry with the Killing Curse. Had Voldemort too collapsed? It seemed like it. And both of them had fallen briefly unconscious and both of them had now returned. . . .

"My Lord, let me —"

"I do not require assistance," said Voldemort coldly, and though he could not see it, Harry pictured Bellatrix withdrawing a helpful hand. "The boy . . . Is he dead?"

There was complete silence in the clearing. Nobody approached

Harry, but he felt their concentrated gaze; it seemed to press him harder into the ground, and he was terrified a finger or an eyelid might twitch.

"You," said Voldemort, and there was a bang and a small shriek of pain. "Examine him. Tell me whether he is dead."

Harry did not know who had been sent to verify. He could only lie there, with his heart thumping traitorously, and wait to be examined, but at the same time noting, small comfort though it was, that Voldemort was wary of approaching him, that Voldemort suspected that all had not gone to plan. . . .

Hands, softer than he had been expecting, touched Harry's face, pulled back an eyelid, crept beneath his shirt, down to his chest, and felt his heart. He could hear the woman's fast breathing, her long hair tickled his face. He knew that she could feel the steady pounding of life against his ribs.

"Is Draco alive? Is he in the castle?"

The whisper was barely audible; her lips were an inch from his ear, her head bent so low that her long hair shielded his face from the onlookers.

"Yes," he breathed back.

He felt the hand on his chest contract; her nails pierced him. Then it was withdrawn. She had sat up.

"He is dead!" Narcissa Malfoy called to the watchers.

And now they shouted, now they yelled in triumph and stamped their feet, and through his eyelids, Harry saw bursts of red and silver light shoot into the air in celebration.

Still feigning death on the ground, he understood. Narcissa knew

that the only way she would be permitted to enter Hogwarts, and find her son, was as part of the conquering army. She no longer cared whether Voldemort won.

"You see?" screeched Voldemort over the tumult. "Harry Potter is dead by my hand, and no man alive can threaten me now! Watch! *Crucio!*"

Harry had been expecting it, knew his body would not be allowed to remain unsullied upon the forest floor; it must be subjected to humiliation to prove Voldemort's victory. He was lifted into the air, and it took all his determination to remain limp, yet the pain he expected did not come. He was thrown once, twice, three times into the air: His glasses flew off and he felt his wand slide a little beneath his robes, but he kept himself floppy and lifeless, and when he fell to the ground for the last time, the clearing echoed with jeers and shrieks of laughter.

"Now," said Voldemort, "we go to the castle, and show them what has become of their hero. Who shall drag the body? No — Wait —"

There was a fresh outbreak of laughter, and after a few moments Harry felt the ground trembling beneath him.

"You carry him," Voldemort said. "He will be nice and visible in your arms, will he not? Pick up your little friend, Hagrid. And the glasses — put on the glasses — he must be recognizable —"

Someone slammed Harry's glasses back onto his face with deliberate force, but the enormous hands that lifted him into the air were exceedingly gentle. Harry could feel Hagrid's arms trembling with the force of his heaving sobs; great tears splashed down upon him as Hagrid cradled Harry in his arms, and Harry did not dare, by

movement or word, to intimate to Hagrid that all was not, yet, lost.

"Move," said Voldemort, and Hagrid stumbled forward, forcing his way through the close-growing trees, back through the forest. Branches caught at Harry's hair and robes, but he lay quiescent, his mouth lolling open, his eyes shut, and in the darkness, while the Death Eaters crowed all around them, and while Hagrid sobbed blindly, nobody looked to see whether a pulse beat in the exposed neck of Harry Potter. . . .

The two giants crashed along behind the Death Eaters; Harry could hear trees creaking and falling as they passed; they made so much din that birds rose shrieking into the sky, and even the jeers of the Death Eaters were drowned. The victorious procession marched on toward the open ground, and after a while Harry could tell, by the lightening of the darkness through his closed eyelids, that the trees were beginning to thin.

"BANE!"

Hagrid's unexpected bellow nearly forced Harry's eyes open. "Happy now, are yeh, that yeh didn' fight, yeh cowardly bunch o' nags? Are yeh happy Harry Potter's — d-dead . . . ?"

Hagrid could not continue, but broke down in fresh tears. Harry wondered how many centaurs were watching their procession pass; he dared not open his eyes to look. Some of the Death Eaters called insults at the centaurs as they left them behind. A little later, Harry sensed, by a freshening of the air, that they had reached the edge of the forest.

"Stop."

Harry thought that Hagrid must have been forced to obey

Voldemort's command, because he lurched a little. And now a chill settled over them where they stood, and Harry heard the rasping breath of the dementors that patrolled the outer trees. They would not affect him now. The fact of his own survival burned inside him, a talisman against them, as though his father's stag kept guardian in his heart.

Someone passed close by Harry, and he knew that it was Voldemort himself because he spoke a moment later, his voice magically magnified so that it swelled through the grounds, crashing upon Harry's eardrums.

"Harry Potter is dead. He was killed as he ran away, trying to save himself while you lay down your lives for him. We bring you his body as proof that your hero is gone.

"The battle is won. You have lost half of your fighters. My Death Eaters outnumber you, and the Boy Who Lived is finished. There must be no more war. Anyone who continues to resist, man, woman, or child, will be slaughtered, as will every member of their family. Come out of the castle now, kneel before me, and you shall be spared. Your parents and children, your brothers and sisters will live and be forgiven, and you will join me in the new world we shall build together."

There was silence in the grounds and from the castle. Voldemort was so close to him that Harry did not dare open his eyes again.

"Come," said Voldemort, and Harry heard him move ahead, and Hagrid was forced to follow. Now Harry opened his eyes a fraction, and saw Voldemort striding in front of them, wearing the great snake Nagini around his shoulders, now free of her enchanted cage. But

Harry had no possibility of extracting the wand concealed under his robes without being noticed by the Death Eaters, who marched on either side of them through the slowly lightening darkness. . . .

"Harry," sobbed Hagrid. "Oh, Harry . . . Harry . . ."

Harry shut his eyes tight again. He knew that they were approaching the castle and strained his ears to distinguish, above the gleeful voices of the Death Eaters and their tramping footsteps, signs of life from those within.

"Stop."

The Death Eaters came to a halt: Harry heard them spreading out in a line facing the open front doors of the school. He could see, even through his closed lids, the reddish glow that meant light streamed upon him from the entrance hall. He waited. Any moment, the people for whom he had tried to die would see him, lying apparently dead, in Hagrid's arms.

"NO!"

The scream was the more terrible because he had never expected or dreamed that Professor McGonagall could make such a sound. He heard another woman laughing nearby, and knew that Bellatrix gloried in McGonagall's despair. He squinted again for a single second and saw the open doorway filling with people, as the survivors of the battle came out onto the front steps to face their vanquishers and see the truth of Harry's death for themselves. He saw Voldemort standing a little in front of him, stroking Nagini's head with a single white finger. He closed his eyes again.

"No!"

"No!"

"Harry! HARRY!"

Ron's, Hermione's, and Ginny's voices were worse than McGonagall's; Harry wanted nothing more than to call back, yet he made himself lie silent, and their cries acted like a trigger; the crowd of survivors took up the cause, screaming and yelling abuse at the Death Eaters, until —

"SILENCE!" cried Voldemort, and there was a bang and a flash of bright light, and silence was forced upon them all. "It is over! Set him down, Hagrid, at my feet, where he belongs!"

Harry felt himself lowered onto the grass.

"You see?" said Voldemort, and Harry felt him striding backward and forward right beside the place where he lay. "Harry Potter is dead! Do you understand now, deluded ones? He was nothing, ever, but a boy who relied on others to sacrifice themselves for him!"

"He beat you!" yelled Ron, and the charm broke, and the defenders of Hogwarts were shouting and screaming again until a second, more powerful bang extinguished their voices once more.

"He was killed while trying to sneak out of the castle grounds," said Voldemort, and there was relish in his voice for the lie, "killed while trying to save himself —"

But Voldemort broke off: Harry heard a scuffle and a shout, then another bang, a flash of light, and a grunt of pain; he opened his eyes an infinitesimal amount. Someone had broken free of the crowd and charged at Voldemort: Harry saw the figure hit the ground, Disarmed, Voldemort throwing the challenger's wand aside and laughing.

"And who is this?" he said in his soft snake's hiss. "Who has volunteered to demonstrate what happens to those who continue to

fight when the battle is lost?"

Bellatrix gave a delighted laugh.

"It is Neville Longbottom, my Lord! The boy who has been giving the Carrows so much trouble! The son of the Aurors, remember?"

"Ah, yes, I remember," said Voldemort, looking down at Neville, who was struggling back to his feet, unarmed and unprotected, standing in the no-man's-land between the survivors and the Death Eaters. "But you are a pureblood, aren't you, my brave boy?" Voldemort asked Neville, who stood facing him, his empty hands curled in fists.

"So what if I am?" said Neville loudly.

"You show spirit and bravery, and you come of noble stock. You will make a very valuable Death Eater. We need your kind, Neville Longbottom."

"I'll join you when hell freezes over," said Neville. "Dumbledore's Army!" he shouted, and there was an answering cheer from the crowd, whom Voldemort's Silencing Charms seemed unable to hold.

"Very well," said Voldemort, and Harry heard more danger in the silkiness of his voice than in the most powerful curse. "If that is your choice, Longbottom, we revert to the original plan. On your head," he said quietly, "be it."

Still watching through his lashes, Harry saw Voldemort wave his wand. Seconds later, out of one of the castle's shattered windows, something that looked like a misshapen bird flew through the half light and landed in Voldemort's hand. He shook the mildewed object by its pointed end and it dangled, empty and ragged: the Sorting Hat.

“There will be no more Sorting at Hogwarts School,” said Voldemort. “There will be no more Houses. The emblem, shield, and colors of my noble ancestor, Salazar Slytherin, will suffice for everyone. Won’t they, Neville Longbottom?”

He pointed his wand at Neville, who grew rigid and still, then forced the hat onto Neville’s head, so that it slipped down below his eyes. There were movements from the watching crowd in front of the castle, and as one, the Death Eaters raised their wands, holding the fighters of Hogwarts at bay.

“Neville here is now going to demonstrate what happens to anyone foolish enough to continue to oppose me,” said Voldemort, and with a flick of his wand, he caused the Sorting Hat to burst into flames.

Screams split the dawn, and Neville was aflame, rooted to the spot, unable to move, and Harry could not bear it: He must act —

And then many things happened at the same moment.

They heard uproar from the distant boundary of the school as what sounded like hundreds of people came swarming over the out-of-sight walls and pelted toward the castle, uttering loud war cries. At the same time, Grawp came lumbering around the side of the castle and yelled, “HAGGER!” His cry was answered by roars from Voldemort’s giants: They ran at Grawp like bull elephants, making the earth quake. Then came hooves and the twangs of bows, and arrows were suddenly falling amongst the Death Eaters, who broke ranks, shouting their surprise. Harry pulled the Invisibility Cloak from inside his robes, swung it over himself, and sprang to his feet, as Neville moved too.

In one swift, fluid motion, Neville broke free of the Body-Bind

Curse upon him; the flaming hat fell off him and he drew from its depths something silver, with a glittering, rubied handle —

The slash of the silver blade could not be heard over the roar of the oncoming crowd or the sounds of the clashing giants or of the stampeding centaurs, and yet it seemed to draw every eye. With a single stroke Neville sliced off the great snake's head, which spun high into the air, gleaming in the light flooding from the entrance hall, and Voldemort's mouth was open in a scream of fury that nobody could hear, and the snake's body thudded to the ground at his feet —

Hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, Harry cast a Shield Charm between Neville and Voldemort before the latter could raise his wand. Then, over the screams and the roars and the thunderous stamps of the battling giants, Hagrid's yell came loudest of all.

"HARRY!" Hagrid shouted. "HARRY — WHERE'S HARRY?"

Chaos reigned. The charging centaurs were scattering the Death Eaters, everyone was fleeing the giants' stamping feet, and nearer and nearer thundered the reinforcements that had come from who knew where; Harry saw great winged creatures soaring around the heads of Voldemort's giants, thestrals and Buckbeak the hippogriff scratching at their eyes while Grawp punched and pummeled them; and now the wizards, defenders of Hogwarts and Death Eaters alike, were being forced back into the castle. Harry was shooting jinxes and curses at any Death Eater he could see, and they crumpled, not knowing what or who had hit them, and their bodies were trampled by the retreating crowd.

Still hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, Harry was buffeted into the entrance hall: He was searching for Voldemort and saw him

across the room, firing spells from his wand as he backed into the Great Hall, still screaming instructions to his followers as he sent curses flying left and right; Harry cast more Shield Charms, and Voldemort's would-be victims, Seamus Finnigan and Hannah Abbott, darted past him into the Great Hall, where they joined the fight already flourishing inside it.

And now there were more, even more people storming up the front steps, and Harry saw Charlie Weasley overtaking Horace Slughorn, who was still wearing his emerald pajamas. They seemed to have returned at the head of what looked like the families and friends of every Hogwarts student who had remained to fight, along with the shopkeepers and homeowners of Hogsmeade. The centaurs Bane, Ronan, and Magorian burst into the hall with a great clatter of hooves, as behind Harry the door that led to the kitchens was blasted off its hinges.

The house-elves of Hogwarts swarmed into the entrance hall, screaming and waving carving knives and cleavers, and at their head, the locket of Regulus Black bouncing on his chest, was Kreacher, his bullfrog's voice audible even above this din: "Fight! Fight! Fight for my Master, defender of house-elves! Fight the Dark Lord, in the name of brave Regulus! Fight!"

They were hacking and stabbing at the ankles and shins of Death Eaters, their tiny faces alive with malice, and everywhere Harry looked Death Eaters were folding under sheer weight of numbers, overcome by spells, dragging arrows from wounds, stabbed in the leg by elves, or else simply attempting to escape, but swallowed by the oncoming horde.

But it was not over yet: Harry sped between duelers, past struggling prisoners, and into the Great Hall.

Voldemort was in the center of the battle, and he was striking and smiting all within reach. Harry could not get a clear shot, but fought his way nearer, still invisible, and the Great Hall became more and more crowded as everyone who could walk forced their way inside.

Harry saw Yaxley slammed to the floor by George and Lee Jordan, saw Dolohov fall with a scream at Flitwick's hands, saw Walden Macnair thrown across the room by Hagrid, hit the stone wall opposite, and slide unconscious to the ground. He saw Ron and Neville bringing down Fenrir Greyback, Aberforth Stunning Rookwood, Arthur and Percy flooring Thicknesse, and Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy running through the crowd, not even attempting to fight, screaming for their son.

Voldemort was now dueling McGonagall, Slughorn, and Kingsley all at once, and there was cold hatred in his face as they wove and ducked around him, unable to finish him —

Bellatrix was still fighting too, fifty yards away from Voldemort, and like her master she dueled three at once: Hermione, Ginny, and Luna, all battling their hardest, but Bellatrix was equal to them, and Harry's attention was diverted as a Killing Curse shot so close to Ginny that she missed death by an inch —

He changed course, running at Bellatrix rather than Voldemort, but before he had gone a few steps he was knocked sideways.

"NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!"

Mrs. Weasley threw off her cloak as she ran, freeing her arms. Bellatrix spun on the spot, roaring with laughter at the sight of her

new challenger.

"OUT OF MY WAY!" shouted Mrs. Weasley to the three girls, and with a swipe of her wand she began to duel. Harry watched with terror and elation as Molly Weasley's wand slashed and twirled, and Bellatrix Lestrange's smile faltered and became a snarl. Jets of light flew from both wands, the floor around the witches' feet became hot and cracked; both women were fighting to kill.

"No!" Mrs. Weasley cried as a few students ran forward, trying to come to her aid. "Get back! *Get back!* She is mine!"

Hundreds of people now lined the walls, watching the two fights, Voldemort and his three opponents, Bellatrix and Molly, and Harry stood, invisible, torn between both, wanting to attack and yet to protect, unable to be sure that he would not hit the innocent.

"What will happen to your children when I've killed you?" taunted Bellatrix, as mad as her master, capering as Molly's curses danced around her. "When Mummy's gone the same way as Freddie?"

"You — will — never — touch — our — children — again!" screamed Mrs. Weasley.

Bellatrix laughed, the same exhilarated laugh her cousin Sirius had given as he toppled backward through the veil, and suddenly Harry knew what was going to happen before it did.

Molly's curse soared beneath Bellatrix's outstretched arm and hit her squarely in the chest, directly over her heart.

Bellatrix's gloating smile froze, her eyes seemed to bulge: For the tiniest space of time she knew what had happened, and then she toppled, and the watching crowd roared, and Voldemort screamed.

Harry felt as though he turned in slow motion; he saw McGonagall,

Kingsley, and Slughorn blasted backward, flailing and writhing through the air, as Voldemort's fury at the fall of his last, best lieutenant exploded with the force of a bomb. Voldemort raised his wand and directed it at Molly Weasley.

"Protego!" roared Harry, and the Shield Charm expanded in the middle of the Hall, and Voldemort stared around for the source as Harry pulled off the Invisibility Cloak at last.

The yell of shock, the cheers, the screams on every side of "Harry!" "HE'S ALIVE!" were stifled at once. The crowd was afraid, and silence fell abruptly and completely as Voldemort and Harry looked at each other, and began, at the same moment, to circle each other.

"I don't want anyone else to try to help," Harry said loudly, and in the total silence his voice carried like a trumpet call. "It's got to be like this. It's got to be me."

Voldemort hissed.

"Potter doesn't mean that," he said, his red eyes wide. "That isn't how he works, is it? Who are you going to use as a shield today, Potter?"

"Nobody," said Harry simply. "There are no more Horcruxes. It's just you and me. Neither can live while the other survives, and one of us is about to leave for good. . . ."

"One of us?" jeered Voldemort, and his whole body was taut and his red eyes stared, a snake that was about to strike. "You think it will be you, do you, the boy who has survived by accident, and because Dumbledore was pulling the strings?"

"Accident, was it, when my mother died to save me?" asked

Harry. They were still moving sideways, both of them, in that perfect circle, maintaining the same distance from each other, and for Harry no face existed but Voldemort's. "Accident, when I decided to fight in that graveyard? Accident, that I didn't defend myself tonight, and still survived, and returned to fight again?"

"Accidents!" screamed Voldemort, but still he did not strike, and the watching crowd was frozen as if Petrified, and of the hundreds in the Hall, nobody seemed to breathe but they two. "Accident and chance and the fact that you crouched and sniveled behind the skirts of greater men and women, and permitted me to kill them for you!"

"You won't be killing anyone else tonight," said Harry as they circled, and stared into each other's eyes, green into red. "You won't be able to kill any of them ever again. Don't you get it? I was ready to die to stop you from hurting these people —"

"But you did not!"

"— I meant to, and that's what did it. I've done what my mother did. They're protected from you. Haven't you noticed how none of the spells you put on them are binding? You can't torture them. You can't touch them. You don't learn from your mistakes, Riddle, do you?"

"You dare —"

"Yes, I dare," said Harry. "I know things you don't know, Tom Riddle. I know lots of important things that you don't. Want to hear some, before you make another big mistake?"

Voldemort did not speak, but prowled in a circle, and Harry knew that he kept him temporarily mesmerized and at bay, held back by the faintest possibility that Harry might indeed know a final secret. . . .

"Is it love again?" said Voldemort, his snake's face jeering. "Dumbledore's favorite solution, *love,* which he claimed conquered death, though love did not stop him falling from the tower and breaking like an old waxwork? *Love,* which did not prevent me stamping out your Mudblood mother like a cockroach, Potter — and nobody seems to love you enough to run forward this time and take my curse. So what will stop you dying now when I strike?"

"Just one thing," said Harry, and still they circled each other, wrapped in each other, held apart by nothing but the last secret.

"If it is not love that will save you this time," said Voldemort, "you must believe that you have magic that I do not, or else a weapon more powerful than mine?"

"I believe both," said Harry, and he saw shock flit across the snakelike face, though it was instantly dispelled; Voldemort began to laugh, and the sound was more frightening than his screams; humorless and insane, it echoed around the silent Hall.

"You think *you* know more magic than I do?" he said. "Than *I,* than Lord Voldemort, who has performed magic that Dumbledore himself never dreamed of?"

"Oh, he dreamed of it," said Harry, "but he knew more than you, knew enough not to do what you've done."

"You mean he was weak!" screamed Voldemort. "Too weak to dare, too weak to take what might have been his, what will be mine!"

"No, he was cleverer than you," said Harry, "a better wizard, a better man."

"I brought about the death of Albus Dumbledore!"

"You thought you did," said Harry, "but you were wrong."

For the first time, the watching crowd stirred as the hundreds of people around the walls drew breath as one.

"Dumbledore is dead!" Voldemort hurled the words at Harry as though they would cause him unendurable pain. "His body decays in the marble tomb in the grounds of this castle, I have seen it, Potter, and he will not return!"

"Yes, Dumbledore's dead," said Harry calmly, "but you didn't have him killed. He chose his own manner of dying, chose it months before he died, arranged the whole thing with the man you thought was your servant."

"What childish dream is this?" said Voldemort, but still he did not strike, and his red eyes did not waver from Harry's.

"Severus Snape wasn't yours," said Harry. "Snape was Dumbledore's, Dumbledore's from the moment you started hunting down my mother. And you never realized it, because of the thing you can't understand. You never saw Snape cast a Patronus, did you, Riddle?"

Voldemort did not answer. They continued to circle each other like wolves about to tear each other apart.

"Snape's Patronus was a doe," said Harry, "the same as my mother's, because he loved her for nearly all of his life, from the time when they were children. You should have realized," he said as he saw Voldemort's nostrils flare, "he asked you to spare her life, didn't he?"

"He desired her, that was all," sneered Voldemort, "but when she had gone, he agreed that there were other women, and of purer blood, worthier of him —"

"Of course he told you that," said Harry, "but he was Dumbledore's spy from the moment you threatened her, and he's been working against you ever since! Dumbledore was already dying when Snape finished him!"

"It matters not!" shrieked Voldemort, who had followed every word with rapt attention, but now let out a cackle of mad laughter. "It matters not whether Snape was mine or Dumbledore's, or what petty obstacles they tried to put in my path! I crushed them as I crushed your mother, Snape's supposed great *love*! Oh, but it all makes sense, Potter, and in ways that you do not understand!

"Dumbledore was trying to keep the Elder Wand from me! He intended that Snape should be the true master of the wand! But I got there ahead of you, little boy — I reached the wand before you could get your hands on it, I understood the truth before you caught up. I killed Severus Snape three hours ago, and the Elder Wand, the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny is truly mine! Dumbledore's last plan went wrong, Harry Potter!"

"Yeah, it did," said Harry. "You're right. But before you try to kill me, I'd advise you to think about what you've done. . . . Think, and try for some remorse, Riddle. . . ."

"What is this?"

Of all the things that Harry had said to him, beyond any revelation or taunt, nothing had shocked Voldemort like this. Harry saw his pupils contract to thin slits, saw the skin around his eyes whiten.

"It's your one last chance," said Harry, "it's all you've got left. . . . I've seen what you'll be otherwise. . . . Be a man . . . try . . . Try for some remorse. . . ."

"You dare — ?" said Voldemort again.

"Yes, I dare," said Harry, "because Dumbledore's last plan hasn't backfired on me at all. It's backfired on you, Riddle."

Voldemort's hand was trembling on the Elder Wand, and Harry gripped Draco's very tightly. The moment, he knew, was seconds away.

"That wand still isn't working properly for you because you murdered the wrong person. Severus Snape was never the true master of the Elder Wand. He never defeated Dumbledore."

"He killed —"

"Aren't you listening? *Snape never beat Dumbledore!* Dumbledore's death was planned between them! Dumbledore intended to die undefeated, the wand's last true master! If all had gone as planned, the wand's power would have died with him, because it had never been won from him!"

"But then, Potter, Dumbledore as good as gave me the wand!" Voldemort's voice shook with malicious pleasure. "I stole the wand from its last master's tomb! I removed it against its last master's wishes! Its power is mine!"

"You still don't get it, Riddle, do you? Possessing the wand isn't enough! Holding it, using it, doesn't make it really yours. Didn't you listen to Ollivander? *The wand chooses the wizard*. . . . The Elder Wand recognized a new master before Dumbledore died, someone who never even laid a hand on it. The new master removed the wand from Dumbledore against his will, never realizing exactly what he had done, or that the world's most dangerous wand had given him its allegiance. . . ."

Voldemort's chest rose and fell rapidly, and Harry could feel the curse coming, feel it building inside the wand pointed at his face.

"The true master of the Elder Wand was Draco Malfoy."

Blank shock showed in Voldemort's face for a moment, but then it was gone.

"But what does it matter?" he said softly. "Even if you are right, Potter, it makes no difference to you and me. You no longer have the phoenix wand: We duel on skill alone . . . and after I have killed you, I can attend to Draco Malfoy. . . ."

"But you're too late," said Harry. "You've missed your chance. I got there first. I overpowered Draco weeks ago. I took this wand from him."

Harry twitched the hawthorn wand, and he felt the eyes of everyone in the Hall upon it.

"So it all comes down to this, doesn't it?" whispered Harry. "Does the wand in your hand know its last master was Disarmed? Because if it does . . . I am the true master of the Elder Wand."

A red-gold glow burst suddenly across the enchanted sky above them as an edge of dazzling sun appeared over the sill of the nearest window. The light hit both of their faces at the same time, so that Voldemort's was suddenly a flaming blur. Harry heard the high voice shriek as he too yelled his best hope to the heavens, pointing Draco's wand:

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Expelliarmus!"

The bang was like a cannon blast, and the golden flames that erupted between them, at the dead center of the circle they had been

treading, marked the point where the spells collided. Harry saw Voldemort's green jet meet his own spell, saw the Elder Wand fly high, dark against the sunrise, spinning across the enchanted ceiling like the head of Nagini, spinning through the air toward the master it would not kill, who had come to take full possession of it at last. And Harry, with the unerring skill of the Seeker, caught the wand in his free hand as Voldemort fell backward, arms splayed, the slit pupils of the scarlet eyes rolling upward. Tom Riddle hit the floor with a mundane finality, his body feeble and shrunken, the white hands empty, the snakelike face vacant and unknowing. Voldemort was dead, killed by his own rebounding curse, and Harry stood with two wands in his hand, staring down at his enemy's shell.

One shivering second of silence, the shock of the moment suspended: and then the tumult broke around Harry as the screams and the cheers and the roars of the watchers rent the air. The fierce new sun dazzled the windows as they thundered toward him, and the first to reach him were Ron and Hermione, and it was their arms that were wrapped around him, their incomprehensible shouts that deafened him. Then Ginny, Neville, and Luna were there, and then all the Weasleys and Hagrid, and Kingsley and McGonagall and Flitwick and Sprout, and Harry could not hear a word that anyone was shouting, nor tell whose hands were seizing him, pulling him, trying to hug some part of him, hundreds of them pressing in, all of them determined to touch the Boy Who Lived, the reason it was over at last —

The sun rose steadily over Hogwarts, and the Great Hall blazed with life and light. Harry was an indispensable part of the mingled

outpourings of jubilation and mourning, of grief and celebration. They wanted him there with them, their leader and symbol, their savior and their guide, and that he had not slept, that he craved the company of only a few of them, seemed to occur to no one. He must speak to the bereaved, clasp their hands, witness their tears, receive their thanks, hear the news now creeping in from every quarter as the morning drew on; that the Imperiused up and down the country had come back to themselves, that Death Eaters were fleeing or else being captured, that the innocent of Azkaban were being released at that very moment, and that Kingsley Shacklebolt had been named temporary Minister of Magic. . . .

They moved Voldemort's body and laid it in a chamber off the Hall, away from the bodies of Fred, Tonks, Lupin, Colin Creevey, and fifty others who had died fighting him. McGonagall had replaced the House tables, but nobody was sitting according to House anymore: All were jumbled together, teachers and pupils, ghosts and parents, centaurs and house-elves, and Firenze lay recovering in a corner, and Grawp peered in through a smashed window, and people were throwing food into his laughing mouth. After a while, exhausted and drained, Harry found himself sitting on a bench beside Luna.

"I'd want some peace and quiet, if it were me," she said.

"I'd love some," he replied.

"I'll distract them all," she said. "Use your Cloak."

And before he could say a word she had cried, "Oooh, look, a Blibbering Humdinger!" and pointed out of the window. Everyone who heard looked around, and Harry slid the Cloak up over himself, and got to his feet.

Now he could move through the Hall without interference. He spotted Ginny two tables away; she was sitting with her head on her mother's shoulder: There would be time to talk later, hours and days and maybe years in which to talk. He saw Neville, the sword of Gryffindor lying beside his plate as he ate, surrounded by a knot of fervent admirers. Along the aisle between the tables he walked, and he spotted the three Malfoys, huddled together as though unsure whether or not they were supposed to be there, but nobody was paying them any attention. Everywhere he looked he saw families reunited, and finally, he saw the two whose company he craved most.

"It's me," he muttered, crouching down between them. "Will you come with me?"

They stood up at once, and together he, Ron, and Hermione left the Great Hall. Great chunks were missing from the marble staircase, part of the balustrade gone, and rubble and bloodstains occurred every few steps as they climbed.

Somewhere in the distance they could hear Peeves zooming through the corridors singing a victory song of his own composition:

We did it, we bashed them, wee Potter's the one,
And Voldy's gone moldy, so now let's have fun!

"Really gives a feeling for the scope and tragedy of the thing, doesn't it?" said Ron, pushing open a door to let Harry and Hermione through.

Happiness would come, Harry thought, but at the moment it was muffled by exhaustion, and the pain of losing Fred and Lupin and Tonks pierced him like a physical wound every few steps. Most of

all he felt the most stupendous relief, and a longing to sleep. But first he owed an explanation to Ron and Hermione, who had stuck with him for so long, and who deserved the truth. Painstakingly he recounted what he had seen in the Pensieve and what had happened in the forest, and they had not even begun to express all their shock and amazement when at last they arrived at the place to which they had been walking, though none of them had mentioned their destination.

Since he had last seen it, the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the headmaster's study had been knocked aside; it stood lopsided, looking a little punch-drunk, and Harry wondered whether it would be able to distinguish passwords anymore.

"Can we go up?" he asked the gargoyle.

"Feel free," groaned the statue.

They clambered over him and onto the spiral stone staircase that moved slowly upward like an escalator. Harry pushed open the door at the top.

He had one, brief glimpse of the stone Pensieve on the desk where he had left it, and then an earsplitting noise made him cry out, thinking of curses and returning Death Eaters and the rebirth of Voldemort —

But it was applause. All around the walls, the headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts were giving him a standing ovation; they waved their hats and in some cases their wigs, they reached through their frames to grip each other's hands; they danced up and down on the chairs in which they had been painted; Dilys Derwent sobbed unashamedly; Dexter Fortescue was waving his ear-trumpet; and

Phineas Nigellus called, in his high, reedy voice, “And let it be noted that Slytherin House played its part! Let our contribution not be forgotten!”

But Harry had eyes only for the man who stood in the largest portrait directly behind the headmaster’s chair. Tears were sliding down from behind the half-moon spectacles into the long silver beard, and the pride and the gratitude emanating from him filled Harry with the same balm as phoenix song.

At last, Harry held up his hands, and the portraits fell respectfully silent, beaming and mopping their eyes and waiting eagerly for him to speak. He directed his words at Dumbledore, however, and chose them with enormous care. Exhausted and bleary-eyed though he was, he must make one last effort, seeking one last piece of advice.

“The thing that was hidden in the Snitch,” he began, “I dropped it in the forest. I don’t know exactly where, but I’m not going to go looking for it again. Do you agree?”

“My dear boy, I do,” said Dumbledore, while his fellow pictures looked confused and curious. “A wise and courageous decision, but no less than I would have expected of you. Does anyone else know where it fell?”

“No one,” said Harry, and Dumbledore nodded his satisfaction.

“I’m going to keep Ignotus’s present, though,” said Harry, and Dumbledore beamed.

“But of course, Harry, it is yours forever, until you pass it on!”

“And then there’s this.”

Harry held up the Elder Wand, and Ron and Hermione looked at it with a reverence that, even in his befuddled and sleep-deprived state,

Harry did not like to see.

"I don't want it," said Harry.

"What?" said Ron loudly. "Are you mental?"

"I know it's powerful," said Harry wearily. "But I was happier with mine. So . . ."

He rummaged in the pouch hung around his neck, and pulled out the two halves of holly still just connected by the finest thread of phoenix feather. Hermione had said that they could not be repaired, that the damage was too severe. All he knew was that if this did not work, nothing would.

He laid the broken wand upon the headmaster's desk, touched it with the very tip of the Elder Wand, and said, *"Reparo."*

As his wand resealed, red sparks flew out of its end. Harry knew that he had succeeded. He picked up the holly and phoenix wand and felt a sudden warmth in his fingers, as though wand and hand were rejoicing at their reunion.

"I'm putting the Elder Wand," he told Dumbledore, who was watching him with enormous affection and admiration, "back where it came from. It can stay there. If I die a natural death like Ignotus, its power will be broken, won't it? The previous master will never have been defeated. That'll be the end of it."

Dumbledore nodded. They smiled at each other.

"Are you sure?" said Ron. There was the faintest trace of longing in his voice as he looked at the Elder Wand.

"I think Harry's right," said Hermione quietly.

"That wand's more trouble than it's worth," said Harry. "And quite honestly," he turned away from the painted portraits, thinking now

only of the four-poster bed lying waiting for him in Gryffindor Tower, and wondering whether Kreacher might bring him a sandwich there, “I’ve had enough trouble for a lifetime.”

— HOOFSTUK SES-EN-DERTIG —

Die Gebrek in die Plan

Hy lê weer met sy gesig plat op die grond. Die reuk van die Woud vul sy neusgate. Hy voel die koue, harde grond onder sy wang, en die skarnier van sy bril, wat skeef gedruk is van die val, sny in sy slaap in. Elke duim van hom pyn, en die plek waar die Moordvloek hom getref het, voel of dit deur 'n ystervuishou gekneus is. Hy roer nie, maar bly presies lê waar hy geval het, met sy linkerarm in 'n ongemaklike posisie opgebuig en sy mond oop.

Hy het verwag om uitroepe van triomf en 'n gejuig te hoor omdat hy dood is, maar in plaas daarvan word die lug gevul met haastige voetstappe, 'n gefluister en 'n bekommerde geprewel.

"My Heer . . . *my Heer* . . ."

Dit is Bellatrix se stem en sy praat soos met 'n geliefde. Harry waag dit nie om sy oë oop te maak nie, maar laat sy ander sintuie toe om die verknorsing waarin hy verkeer, te ondersoek. Hy weet sy towerstaf is onder sy kleed gebêre, want hy voel dit tussen sy borskas en die grond vasgedruk. 'n Effense kussinggevoel in die omgewing van sy maag sê vir hom die Onsigbaarheidsmantel is ook daar, uit die oog ingeprop.

"My Heer . . ."

"Dis genoeg," sê Voldemort se stem.

Nog voetstappe: heelparty mense tree van dieselfde plek af terug. Desperaat om te sien wat gebeur, en hoekom, maak Harry sy oë 'n millimeter oop.

Dit lyk of Voldemort op die been kom. Verskeie Doodseters haas hulle weg van hom af en sluit weer aan by die groep wat in 'n kring om die oopte staan. Slegs Bellatrix bly agter, knielend langs Voldemort.

Harry maak weer sy oë toe en dink na oor wat hy gesien het. Die Doodseters was saamgebondel om Voldemort, wat blykbaar op die grond neergeval het. Iets het gebeur toe hy Harry met die Moordvloek getref het. Het Voldemort ook inmekaar gesak? Dit wil so

voorkom. En hulle albei was vir 'n kort rukkie bewusteloos en hulle albei het nou teruggekeer . . .

"My Heer, laat ek –"

"Ek benodig nie bystand nie," sê Voldemort kil, en al kan hy dit nie sien nie, stel Harry hom voor hoe Bellatrix haar helpende hand terugtrek. "Die seun . . . is hy dood?"

Daar is doodse stilte in die oopte. Niemand kom nader aan Harry nie, maar hy voel hulle intense blik; dit is asof dit hom harder in die grond indruk en hy is doodbang hy verroer dalk 'n vinger of 'n ooglid.

"Jy," sê Voldemort, en daar is 'n knal en 'n onderdrukte gil van pyn. "Ondersoek hom. Sê vir my of hy dood is."

Harry weet nie wie gestuur is om te kom seker maak nie. Hy kan net hier lê, met sy verraaier van 'n hart wat wild bons, en wag om bevoel te word, maar terselfdertyd kom hy agter, al is dit 'n skrale troos, dat Voldemort lugtig is om naby hom te kom, dat Voldemort vermoed alles het nie volgens plan verloop nie . . .

Hande, sagter as wat hy verwag het, raak aan Harry se gesig, trek 'n ooglid terug, kruip onder sy hemp in, af na sy borskas toe en voel sy hart. Hy hoor die vrou se vinnige asemhaling, haar lang hare kielie sy gesig. Hy weet sy sal spoedig die egalige gehamer van lewe teen sy ribbes voel.

"Lewe Draco? Is hy in die kasteel?"

Die fluistering is skaars hoorbaar; haar lippe is 'n duim van sy oor af, haar kop buig so laag oor hom dat haar lang hare sy gesig van die toeskouers afskerm.

"Ja," adem hy terug.

Hy voel hoe die hand op sy borskas saamtrek; haar naels druk in sy vleis. Dan word dit teruggetrek. Sy het regop gekom.

"Hy is dood!" roep Narcissa Malfoy vir die omstanders uit.

En nou skreeu hulle, nou jubel hulle triomfantlik en stamp hulle voete, en deur sy ooglede sien Harry ontploffings van rooi en silwer lig ter viering daarvan die lug inskiet.

Terwyl hy steeds voorgee hy lê dood op die grond, verstaan hy. Narcissa weet die enigste manier hoe sy toegelaat sal word om by Hogwarts in te gaan en haar seun te kry, is om deel van die seëvierende leërmag te wees. Sy gee nie meer om of Voldemort wen nie.

"Sien julle?" roep Voldemort oor die lawaai. "Harry Potter is dood deur my toedoen, en geen lewende mens kan my nou bedreig nie! Kyk! *Crucio!*"

Harry het dit verwag: hy het geweet sy liggaam sal nie toegelaat

word om ongeskonde op die Woud se vloer te bly nie, dit moet aan vernedering onderwerp word om Voldemort se sege te bevestig. Hy word in die lug opgelig en dit verg al sy wilskrag om slap te bly, maar die pyn wat hy verwag, kom nie. Hy word een, twee, drie keer in die lug opgegooi: sy bril vlieg af en hy voel hoe sy towerstaf onder sy kleed rondgly, maar hy hou hom pap en leweloos, en toe hy die laaste keer op die grond val, weerklink die oopte van 'n gejou en 'n gelag.

"Nou," sê Voldemort, "gaan ons na die kasteel toe om vir hulle te wys wat van hulle held geword het. Wie gaan die liggaam sleep? Nee – Wag –"

Daar bars opnuut 'n gelag los, en ná 'n paar oomblikke voel Harry die grond onder hom bewe.

"Dra jy hom," sê Voldemort. "Hy sal mooi sigbaar in jou arms wees, of hoe? Tel jou maatjie op, Hagrid. En die bril – sit die bril op – hy moet herkenbaar wees."

Iemand druk Harry se bril opsetlik hardhandig terug op sy gesig, maar die enorme hande wat hom in die lug optel, werk uitermate sag met hom. Harry voel hoe Hagrid se arms van sy hewige snikke bewe, groot trane val op hom terwyl Hagrid hom in sy arms wieg, en Harry waag dit nie om met 'n beweging of woord vir Hagrid te kenne te gee dat alles nog nie verlore is nie.

"Beweeg," sê Voldemort, en Hagrid strompel vorentoe, en baan vir hom 'n pad oop deur die bome wat so dig op mekaar groei, terug deur die Woud. Takke haak aan Harry se hare en kleed vas, maar hy lê roerloos, sy mond oop, sy oë toe, en in die duisternis, terwyl die Doodseters oral om hulle oor die oorwinning kraai, en terwyl Hagrid blindelings snik, kyk niemand om te sien of daar 'n polsslag in Harry Potter se blootgestelde nek is nie . . .

Die twee reuse loop donderend agter die Doodseters aan. Harry hoor bome in die verbygaan kraak en val; hulle maak soveel geraas dat die voëls krysend in die lug op vlieg en selfs die Doodseters se gejou verdoof. Die seëvierende optog marsjeer voort na die oop terrein, en ná 'n ruk, toe die duisternis ligter word deur sy geslote ooglede, besef Harry die bome begin yler word.

"VERVLAKS!"

Hagrid se onverwagte brul dwing Harry se oë amper oop. "Is julle nou bly julle het nie baklei nie, julle lafhartige spul donkies? Is julle bly Harry Potter is – d – dood . . .?

Hagrid kan nie aangaan nie; hy bars opnuut in trane uit. Harry wonder hoeveel sentours hou die verbygaande optog dop; hy durf nie sy oë oopmaak om te kyk nie. Party van die Doodseters slinger

beledigings na die sentours terwyl hulle die gehoefdes agterlaat. 'n Rukkie later laat die varser lug Harry besef hulle het die rand van die Woud bereik.

"Stop."

Harry lei af Hagrid moes gedwing word om Voldemort se bevel te gehoorsaam, want hy steier effens. En nou daal daar 'n kilheid oor hulle neer waar hulle staan, en Harry hoor die hortende asemhaling van die Dementors wat die buitenste bome patrolleer. Hulle sal nou niks aan hom doen nie. Die feit dat hy oorleef het, brand binne-in hom, 'n gelukbringer teen hulle, asof sy pa se takbok sy hart bewaak.

Iemand loop naby Harry verby, en hy weet dit is Voldemort, want hy praat 'n oomblik later, sy stem toweragtig versterk sodat dit oor die skoolterrein uitswel en teen Harry se trommelvliese vasslaan.

"Harry Pottter is dood. Hy is gedood terwyl hy weggehardloop het, homself probeer red het terwyl julle julle lewe vir hom gee. Ons bring vir julle sy liggaam as bewys dat julle held daarmee heen is.

"Die slag is gewonne. Julle het die helfte van julle vegters verloor. My Doodseters oortref julle in getalle en die Seun Wat Bly Leef Het, leef nie meer nie. Hierdie oorlog moet nou end kry. Enigiemand wat verdere weerstand bied, man, vrou of kind, sal sterf, so ook elke lid van daardie persoon se gesin. Kom nou by die kasteel uit, kniel voor my, en julle sal gespaar word. Julle ouers en kinders, julle broers en susters sal lewe en vergewe word, en julle sal by my aansluit in die nuwe wêreld wat ons saam gaan bou."

Daar is stilte regoor die terrein en van die kasteel af. Voldemort is so naby aan hom dat Harry dit nie waag om sy oë weer oop te maak nie.

"Kom," sê Voldemort, en Harry hoor hom vorentoe beweeg, en Hagrid word gedwing om te volg. Nou maak Harry sy oë op skrefies oop en sien Voldemort voor hulle uitstap met die groot slang Nagini om sy skouers; sy is nou vrygelaat uit haar betowerde hok. Maar Harry kan onmoontlik die towerstaf onder sy kleed ongesiens uithaal, want daar marsjeer Doodseters aan weerskante van hulle deur die donkerte wat nou stadig ligter word . . .

"Harry," snik Hagrid. "O, Harry . . . Harry . . ."

Harry maak sy oë weer styf toe. Hy weet hulle beweeg nader aan die kasteel en spits sy ore om uit te vind of hy bo die Doodseters se opgetoë stemme en vasberade voetstappe tekens van lewe van die mense daarbinne kan hoor.

"Stop."

Die Doodseters kom tot stilstand: Harry hoor hoe sprei hulle uit en vorm 'n ry voor die skool se oop voordeure. Hy sien, selfs deur sy geslote ooglede, die rooierige gloed wat beteken lig stroom vanuit die Ingangsportaal tot op hom. Hy wag. Die mense vir wie hy probeer sterf het, sal hom nou enige oomblik sien, skynbaar dood in Hagrid se arms.

"NEE!"

Die uitroep is ekstra aaklig omdat hy nooit verwag of gedroom het dat professor McGonagall so 'n geluid kan uiter nie. Hy hoor 'n ander vrou iewers naby lag, en weet Bellatrix verlekker haar in McGonagall se wanhoop. Hy loer weer deur skrefiesoë, net 'n sekonde lank, en sien hoe die deuropening vol word toe die mense wat die slagting oorleef het, uitkom tot op die trap om hulle oorwinnaars te konfronteer, en met hulle eie oë te sien Harry is dood. Hy sien Voldemort 'n entjie voor hom staan, besig om Nagini se kop met 'n enkele wit vinger te streel. Hy maak sy oë weer toe.

"Nee!"

"Nee!"

"Harry! HARRY!"

Ron, Hermione en Ginny se stemme is erger as McGonagall s'n; Harry wil bitter graag terugroep, maar hy dwing homself om stil te lê, en hulle gille ontketen 'n uitbarsting, en die groep oorlewendes sê die vyand die stryd aan en slinger en skreeu die Doodseters beledigings toe totdat –

"STILTE!" roep Voldemort uit, en daar is 'n knal en 'n helder ligflits, en hulle word almal tot stilswye gedwing. "Dit is verby! Sit hom neer, Hagrid, aan my voete, waar hy hoort!"

Harry voel hoe hy op die gras neergesit word.

"Sien julle?" sê Voldemort, en Harry voel hom lang treë agtertoe en vorentoe gee, reg langs die plek waar hy lê. "Harry Potter is dood! Verstaan julle nou? Julle is mislei! Hy was nooit, ooit meer as net 'n seun wat op ander staatgemaak het om hulle vir hom op te offer nie!"

"Hy't jou verslaan!" gil Ron, en die towerspreuk is verbreek, en Hogwarts se verdedigers skreeu en gil weer totdat 'n tweede, harder knal hulle stemme opnuut stilmaak.

"Hy is gedood terwyl hy van die kasteel probeer wegsluip het," sê Voldemort, en sy stem verklap die behae wat hy in die leuen skep, "doodgemaak terwyl hy sy eie bas probeer red het –"

Maar dan bly Voldemort stil: Harry hoor 'n geworstel en 'n gil, dan nog 'n knal, 'n ligflits en 'n steun van pyn. Hy maak sy oë op

oneindige klein skrefies oop. Iemand het uit die groep weggebreek en op Voldemort afgestorm. Harry sien hoe die figuur die grond tref, Ontwapen, en hoe Voldemort die uitdager se towerstaf laggend eenkant toe smyt.

"En wie is dit?" sê hy in sy sagte slangsis. "Wie het vrywillig aangebied om te demonstreer wat gebeur met diegene wat aanhou veg wanneer die slag reeds verloor is?"

Bellatrix lag behaaglik.

"Dit is Neville Longbottom, my Heer! Die seun wat die Carrows soveel las gegee het! Die Aurors se seun, onthou u?"

"A ja, ek onthou," sê Voldemort terwyl hy afkyk na Neville wat sukkelend weer op die been kom, ongewapen en onbeskerm, in die niemandsland tussen die oorlewendes en die Doodseters. "Maar jy is 'n suiwerbloed, nie waar nie, my dapper seun?" vra Voldemort vir Neville wat voor hom staan met sy leë hande in vuiste gebal.

"Wat daarvan as ek is?" sê Neville hard.

"Jy toon wilskrag en heldemoed, en jy is van adellike afkoms. Jy sal 'n baie waardevolle Doodseter wees. Ons het jou soort nodig, Neville Longbottom."

"Ek sal oor my dooie liggaam by julle aansluit," sê Neville. "Dumbledore se Soldate!" roep hy en word beantwoord deur 'n gejuig vanuit die groep wat blykbaar nie deur Voldemort se swygvloeke in toom gehou kan word nie.

"Nou goed dan," sê Voldemort, en Harry hoor groter gevaar in sy fluweelsagte stem as in die vurigste vloek ooit. "As dit jou keuse is, Longbottom, keer ons terug tot die oorspronklike plan. Dis jou verantwoordelikheid," sê hy sag.

Harry loer nog steeds deur sy ooglede en sien hoe Voldemort sy towerstaf swaai. Sekondes later vlieg daar deur die halflig iets wat soos 'n misvormde voël lyk by een van die kasteel se gebreekte vensters uit en land in Voldemort se hand. Hy skud die gemufte voorwerp aan sy gepunte bokant en dit hang leeg en verflenter: die Sorteerhoed.

"Daar sal nie meer enige Sortering by Hogwarts plaasvind nie," sê Voldemort. "Daar sal nie meer huise wees nie. My edel voorvader, Salazar Slytherin, se embleem, skild en kleure sal voldoende vir almal wees, of hoe, Neville Longbottom?"

Hy wys met sy towerstaf na Neville, wat styf en stil word, dan forseer hy die Hoed op Neville se kop sodat dit oor sy ore afgly. Daar is 'n beroering onder die groep toeskouers voor die kasteel en die Doodseters lig hulle towerstawwe soos een man om Hogwarts se vegters in bedwang te hou.

"Neville hier gaan nou vir ons demonstreer wat gebeur met iemand wat dwaas genoeg is om aan te hou om my teë te staan," sê Voldemort, en met 'n swiep van sy towerstaf laat hy die Sorteerhoed in vlamme uitbars,

Gille deurklief die dagbreek, en Neville is aan die brand, vasgenael waar hy staan, nie in staat om te beweeg nie, en Harry kan dit nie verdra nie: hy moet iets doen –

En dan gebeur baie dinge tegelyk.

Hulle hoor 'n veraf lawaai van die skool se grense af, toe wat soos honderde mense klink oor die mure uit die oog aangeswerm kom en met harde oorlogskrete op die kasteel afstorm. Terselfdertyd verskyn Ghrop lomp om die kant van die kasteel en skree: "HAGGER!" Sy kreet word beantwoord deur Voldemort se reuse wat brul: hulle storm soos olifantbulle op Ghrop af en laat die aarde bewe. Dan kom daar hoewe, en die snaarklanke van boë, en pyle val skielik tussen die Doodseters, wat uiteenspat en onthuts uitroep. Harry trek die Onsigbaarheidsmantel onder sy kleed uit, gooi dit oor hom en spring op, net toe Neville ook beweeg.

Met een vinnige, vloeiende beweging breek Neville los uit die Vasbindvloek op hom; die brandende Hoed val van hom af en uit die dieptes daarvan pluk hy iets wat silwer is, met 'n glinsterende robynhef –

Die silwer lem se kapgeluid is onhoorbaar bo die aankomende menigte se gebrul, en die geluide van die bakleiende reuse, en die oprukkende sentours, maar nogtans is dit asof almal se oë vasgenael is daarop. Met een enkele hou kap Neville die groot slang se kop af en dit tol hoog in die lug op, glinsterend in die lig wat by die Ingangsportaal uitstroom, en Voldemort se mond is oop in 'n geskreeu van woede wat niemand kan hoor nie, en die slang se lyf plof met 'n dowwe slag op die grond voor sy voete neer –

"HARRY!" skreeu Hagrid. "HARRY – WAAR'S HARRY?"

Daar heers chaos. Die stormende sentours dryf die Doodseters verder uitmekaar, almal probeer onder die reuse se stampende voete uitkom, en die versterkings wat van wie weet waar af opdaag, kom dreunend nader en nader; Harry sien groot gevleuelde dierasies om Voldemort se reuse se koppe rondvlieg, en Testrals en Bokbek die Hippogrief krap na hulle oë terwyl Ghrop hulle met die vuiste bydam; en nou word die towenaars, Hogwarts se verdedigers sowel as Voldemort se Doodseters, terug by die kasteel ingedwing. Harry peper enige Doodseter wat hy kan sien met paljasse en vloeke, en hulle sak inmekaar sonder om te weet wat of wie hulle getref het, en hulle liggame word vertrap deur die menigte wat by die kasteel in vlug.

Harry, wat steeds onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel versteek is, word by die Ingangsportaal ingestamp: hy soek na Voldemort en sien hom aan die ander kant van die vertrek, besig om towerspreuke met sy towerstaf af te vuur terwyl hy agteruit beweeg na die Groot Saal toe, terwyl hy vir sy volgelinge instruksies skree en links en regs vloeke laat rondvlieg; Harry tower nog Skildspreuke op, en Voldemort se beoogde slagoffers, Seamus Finnigan en Hannah Abbott, skiet verby hom en in by die Groot Saal waar hulle aansluit by die geveg wat daarbinne woed.

En nou is daar meer, selfs meer mense wat by die voorste trap opstorm, en Harry sien hoe skiet Charlie Weasley verby Horace Slughorn wat steeds sy smaragpajamas aanhet. Hulle is aan die voorpunt van wat lyk soos die families en vriende van elke Hogwartsstudent wat agtergebly het om te veg, sowel as al Hogsmeade se winkeliers en huiseienaars. Die sentours Bane, Ronan en Magorian bars met 'n luide geklap van hoewe by die Saal in net toe die deur agter Harry wat na die kombuise toe lei, van sy skarniere af geskiet word.

Hogwarts se swerm huiselwe storm by die Ingangsportaal in, skreeuend en gewapen met vleismesse en slagtersbyle wat hulle rondswaai, en vooraan hulle, met Regulus Black se hangertjie wat op sy borskas bons, is Skepsel, sy brulpaddastem selfs bo hierdie kabaal hoorbaar: "Veg! Veg! Veg vir my meester, beskermheer van huiselwe! Veg teen die Donker Heer, in die naam van die dapper Regulus! Veg!"

Hulle kap en steek na die Doodseters se enkels en skene, hulle klein gesiggies vertrek van venyn, en oral waar Harry kyk, word Doodseters oorweldig deur die totale oormag, oorrompel deur towerspreuke, deur elwe in die been gesteek, en is hulle besig om pyle uit wonde te trek, of anders eenvoudig om te probeer ontsnap, net om deur die aankomende horde ingesluk te word.

Maar dit is nog nie verby nie: Harry haas hom tussen tweegevegte deur, verby worstelende gevangenes, en by die Groot Saal in.

Voldemort is in die middel van die stryd, en hy slaan en kap na almal binne sy bereik. Harry kan nie 'n skoon skoot kry nie, maar baklei sy pad oop tot nader aan hom, steeds onsigbaar, en die Groot Saal word al voller en voller soos almal wat kan, binnetoe beur.

Harry sien hoe George en Lee Jordan Yaxley op die grond neersmyt, sien hoe Flitwick Dolohof met 'n brul laat val, sien hoe slinger Hagrid vir Walden Macnair deur die vertrek: die Doodseter tref die oorkantste muur en gly bewusteloos grond toe. Hy sien hoe ver-

slaan Ron en Neville vir Fenrir Greyback, hoe Bedwelm Aberforth vir Rookwood, hoe loop Arthur en Percy vir Thicknesse plat, en hoe Lucius en Narcissa deur die massa mense hardloop en nie eens probeer veg nie, maar histeries na hulle seun roep.

Voldemort veg nou teen McGonagall, Slughorn en Kingsley tegelyk, en daar is koue haat op sy gesig terwyl hulle om hom vleg en koes, nie by magte om met hom klaar te speel nie –

Bellatrix veg ook, vyftig tree van Voldemort af, en net soos haar meester, baklei sy teen drie tegelyk: Hermione, Ginny en Luna, wat hulle bes doen, maar Bellatrix is opgewasse teen hulle, en Harry se aandag word afgelei toe 'n Moordvloek so naby aan Ginny verbyskiet dat sy die dood rakelings vryspring –

Hy verander van koers en storm op Bellatrix eerder as Voldemort af, maar ná 'n paar tree word hy eenkant toe gestamp.

"NIE MY DOGTER NIE, JOU TEEF!"

Mevrou Weasley gooi haar mantel in die hardloop af sodat haar arms vryelik kan beweeg. Bellatrix tol in die rondte en brul van die lag toe sy sien wie haar nuwe uitdager is.

"UIT MY PAD UIT!" skree mevrou Weasley vir die drie meisies, en met 'n swiep van haar towerstaf begin sy baklei. Harry kyk met vrees en verrukking hoe Molly Weasley se towerstaf swiep en swaai, en Bellatrix Lestrange se glimlag weifel en word 'n venynige gesis. Ligstrale vlieg uit albei towerstawwe, die vloer om die hekse se voete word warm en kraak; albei vrouens veg om dood te maak.

"Nee!" roep mevrou Weasley uit toe 'n paar studente vorentoe hardloop om haar te hulp te probeer snel. "Staan terug! *Staan terug!* Sy's myne!"

Honderde mense staan nou teen die mure en kyk na die twee gevegte: Voldemort en sy drie opponente, en Bellatrix en Molly, en Harry staan onsigbaar, verskeur tussen albei: hy wil aanval, maar ook beskerm, maar kan nie seker wees dat hy nie 'n onskuldige slagoffer sal tref nie.

"Wat gaan van jou kinders word as ek jou doodgemaak het?" vra Bellatrix tartend, so mal soos haar meester, terwyl sy bokspring om Molly se vloeke wat om haar dans, te ontwyk. "As Mammie weg is, nes Freddie?"

"Jy – sal – nooit – weer – aan – ons – kinders – raak – nie!" skreeu mevrou Weasley.

Bellatrix lag, dieselfde euforiese lag wat haar neef Sirius gelag het toe hy agteroor deur die sluier getuimel het, en skielik weet Harry wat gaan gebeur voor dit gebeur.

Molly se vloek vlieg onder Bellatrix se uitgestrekte arm deur en tref haar vol op die bors, reg op haar hart.

Bellatrix se leedvermakerige glimlag stol, dit lyk of haar oë uitpeul: vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde weet sy wat gebeur het, en dan kantel sy, en die starende menigte brul, en Voldemort skree.

Harry voel of hy in stadige aksie omdraai; hy sien hoe McGonagall, Kingsley en Slughorn agtertoe geskiet word en in die lug spartel en spook toe Voldemort se woede oor die val van sy laaste, beste luitenant met die geweld van 'n bom ontplof. Voldemort lig sy towerstaf en rig dit op Molly Weasley.

"*Protego!*" bulder Harry, en die Skildspreuk verrys in die middel van die Saal, en Voldemort kyk rond na die bron daarvan terwyl Harry die Onsigbaarheidsmantel uiteindelik van hom afpluk.

Die uitroepe van skok, die toejuiging, die gille uit alle oorde van "Harry!" en "HY LEWE!" word onmiddellik gesmoor. Die skare mense is bang, en volslae stilte daal plotseling neer terwyl Voldemort en Harry mekaar aankyk en terselfdertyd in 'n sirkel om mekaar begin beweeg.

"Ek wil nie hê enigiemand moet probeer help nie," sê Harry hard, en in die absolute stilte dra sy stem soos 'n trompetgeskal. "Dit moet só wees. Dit moet ek wees."

Voldemort sis.

"Potter bedoel dit nie," sê hy, sy rooi oë wyd. "Dis nie hoe hy te werk gaan nie, is dit? Wie gaan jy vandag as 'n skild gebruik, Potter?"

"Niemand nie," sê Harry eenvoudig. "Daar is geen Horcruxe meer nie. Dis net ek en jy. Nie een van ons twee kan leef terwyl die ander een oorleef nie, en een van ons gaan binnekort vir goed verdwyn . . ."

"Een van ons?" koggel Voldemort en sy hele lyf is gespanne en sy rooi oë staar, 'n slang gereed om te pik. "Jy dink dit sal jy wees, of hoe, die seun wat toevallig oorleef het, en omdat Dumbledore die toutjies getrek het?"

"So dis toeval dat my ma dood is om my te red?" vra Harry. Hulle beweeg steeds sywaarts, hulle albei, in daardie perfekte sirkel, terwyl hulle dieselfde afstand van mekaar handhaaf, en vir Harry bestaan daar geen ander gesig as Voldemort s'n nie. "Toeval dat ek in daardie begraafplaas besluit het om te veg? Toeval dat ek myself nie vannag verdedig het nie, en nogtans oorleef het, en teruggekom het om weer te veg?"

"*Alles toeval!*" roep Voldemort uit, maar hy val nie aan nie, en die skare toeskouers staan stil asof hulle versteen is, en dit is asof nie

een van die honderde mense in die Saal asemhaal nie, net hulle twee. "Toeval en geluk, en die feit dat jy snotneus agter groter manne en vroue se mantels geskuil het, en my toegelaat het om hulle in plaas van jou dood te maak!"

"Jy gaan niemand meer vanaand doodmaak nie," sê Harry terwyl hulle in die sirkel beweeg en in mekaar se oë staar, groen in rooi. "Jy sal nie een van hulle kan doodmaak nie, nooit weer nie. Verstaan jy nie? Ek was bereid om te sterf om te keer dat jy hierdie mense seermaak –"

"Maar jy is nie dood nie!"

"– ek wou sterf, en dis wat die verskil gemaak het. Ek het gedoen wat my ma gedoen het. Hulle word teen jou beskerm. Het jy nie agtergekom hoe nie een van die towerspreuke wat jy oor hulle uitspreek, gewerk het nie? Jy kan hulle nie martel nie. Jy kan nie aan hulle raak nie. Jy leer nie uit jou foute nie, Riddle!"

"Durf jy –?"

"Ja, ek durf," sê Harry. "Ek weet dinge wat jy nie weet nie, Tom Riddle. Ek weet baie belangrike dinge wat jy nie weet nie. Wil jy 'n paar hoor, voor jy nog 'n groot fout maak?"

Voldemort praat nie, maar sluip in die rondte, en Harry weet hy hou hom tydelik gehipnotiseer en op 'n afstand, teruggehou deur die vaagste moontlikheid dat Harry dalk werklik van 'n laaste geheim weet . . .

"Is dit weer liefde?" vra Voldemort, sy slanggesig honend, "Dumbledore se gunstelingoplossing, *liefde*, wat hy beweer het die dood oorwin, hoewel liefde nie verhoed het dat hy by die Toring afval en soos 'n ou wasbeeld verkrummel nie? *Liefde*, wat nie verhoed het dat ek jou Modderbloed van 'n ma soos 'n kakkerlak uitgewis het nie, Potter – en blykbaar het niemand jou lief genoeg om hierdie keer vorentoe te hardloop en my vloek te ontvang nie. So, wat sal nou verhoed dat jy sterf as ek toeslaan?"

"Net een ding," sê Harry, en hulle beweeg steeds in 'n sirkel, oë net vir mekaar, met slegs die laaste geheim wat hulle uitmekaar hou.

"As dit nie liefde is wat jou hierdie keer gaan red nie," sê Voldemort, "moet jy glo jy beskik oor towerkrag wat ek nie het nie, of anders 'n wapen wat sterker as myne is?"

"Ek glo albei," sê Harry, en hy sien hoe skok oor die slanggesig flits, al verberg hy dit oombliklik; Voldemort begin lag, en die geluid is meer angswekkend as sy uitroepe; dit eggo humorloos en waansinnig deur die stil Saal.

"Jy dink *jy* beskik oor meer towerkrag as ek?" sê hy. "As *ek*, as

die Heer Voldemort, wat vorendag gekom het met towerkuns waarvan selfs Dumbledore nooit gedroom het nie?"

"O, hy het daarvan gedroom," sê Harry, "maar hy het meer as jy geweet, genoeg geweet om nie te doen wat jy gedoen het nie."

"Jy bedoel hy was swak!" skree Voldemort. "Te swak om te waag, te swak om te vat wat syne kon gewees het, wat nou myne sal wees!"

"Nee, hy was slimmer as jy," sê Harry, "'n beter towenaar, 'n beter mens."

"Ek het Albus Dumbledore se dood bewerkstellig!"

"Jy't gedink jy het," sê Harry, "maar jy was verkeerd."

Die starende skare roer vir die eerste keer toe die honderde mense langs die mure rondom hulle almal saam diep asem intrek.

"*Dumbledore is dood!*" slinger Voldemort die woorde na Harry asof dit hom ondraaglike pyn sal besorg. "Sy liggaam verrot in die marmergraf in die tuin buite hierdie kasteel, ek het dit gesien, Potter, en hy sal nie terugkeer nie!"

"Ja, Dumbledore's dood," sê Harry kalm, "maar jy het hom nie laat doodmaak nie. Hy het self gekies hoe hy wou doodgaan, hy het dit maande voor sy dood gekies, die hele ding beplan saam met die man wat jy gedink het jou kneg is."

"Watter kinderagtige droom is dit hierdie?" vra Voldemort, maar hy val steeds nie aan nie, en sy rooi oë wyk nie van Harry s'n nie.

"Severus Snape was nie joune nie," sê Harry. "Snape was Dumbledore s'n, Dumbledore s'n van die oomblik dat jy op my ma begin jag maak het. En jy het dit nooit besef nie, oor die ding wat jy nie kan verstaan nie. Jy het Snape nooit 'n Patronus sien optower nie, het jy, Riddle?"

Voldemort antwoord nie. Hulle hou aan om in 'n sirkel te beweeg soos wolwe wat mekaar enige oomblik gaan verskeur.

"Snape se Patronus was 'n takbokooi," sê Harry, "dieselfde as my ma s'n, want hy was amper sy hele lewe lank lief vir haar, van hulle kinderdae af. Jy moes dit besef het," sê hy toe hy sien hoe Voldemort se neusvleuels oopsper, "want hy het jou gevra om haar lewe te spaar, het hy nie?"

"Hy het haar begeer, dit was al," sê Voldemort smalend, "maar ná sy weg is, het hy saamgestem dat daar ander vrouens is, suiwerder van bloed, wat hom waardiger is –"

"Natuurlik het hy vir jou so gesê," sê Harry, "maar hy was Dumbledore se spioen van die oomblik dat jy 'n bedreiging vir haar geword het, en hy het van toe af die hele tyd teen jou gewerk! Dumbledore was klaar sterwend toe Snape 'n einde aan hom gemaak het!"

"Dit maak nie saak nie!" skree Voldemort, wat elke woord met gespanne aandag gevolg het, maar nou waansinnig begin kekkel van die lag. "Dit maak nie saak of Snape myne of Dumbledore s'n was nie, of watter niksbeduidende struikelblokke hulle in my pad probeer plaas het nie! Ek het hulle verbrysel soos wat ek jou ma, Snape se kwansuise groot *liefde*, verbrysel het! O, maar dit maak alles sin, Potter, en op maniere wat jy nie verstaan nie!

"Dumbledore het die Vlierstaf van my probeer weghou! Hy wou hê Snape moes die towerstaf se ware meester wees! Maar ek het voor jou daar uitgekom, seuntjie – ek het die towerstaf ingepalm voor jy dit in die hande kon kry, ek het die waarheid verstaan voor jou. Ek het Severus Snape drie uur gelede doodgemaak, en die Vlierstaf, die Doodstok, die Towerstaf van die Noodlot is nou waarlik myne! Dumbledore se laaste plan het skeefgeloop, Harry Potter!"

"Ja, dit het," sê Harry. "Jy's reg. Maar voor jy my probeer doodmaak, wil ek jou aanraai om te dink oor wat jy gedoen het . . . Dink, en kyk of daar 'n bietjie berou in jou oor is, Riddle . . ."

"Wat bedoel jy?"

Van al die dinge wat Harry vir hom gesê het, al die onthullings en uittarting, het niks Voldemort só geskok nie. Harry sien hoe sy pupille tot dun skrefies vernou, sien hoe die vel om sy oë wit word.

"Dis jou een laaste kans," sê Harry, "dis al wat jy oorhet . . . Ek het gesien wat anders van jou gaan word . . . Wees 'n man . . . kyk . . . kyk of daar 'n bietjie berou in jou oor is . . ."

"Durf jy –?"

"Ja, ek durf," sê Harry, "want Dumbledore se laaste plan het glad nie op my geboemerang nie. Dit het op jou geboemerang, Riddle."

Voldemort se hand bewe op die Vlierstaf en Harry hou Draco s'n baie styf vas. Hy weet die oomblik is sekondes ver weg.

"Daardie towerstaf werk steeds nie ordentlik vir jou nie, want jy't die verkeerde persoon vermoor. Severus Snape was nooit regtig die ware meester van die Vlierstaf nie. Hy het Dumbledore nooit verslaan nie."

"Hy't hom doodgemaak –"

"Luister jy nie? *Snape het Dumbledore nooit verslaan nie!* Hulle het Dumbledore se dood saam beplan! Dumbledore was van plan om onoorwonne dood te gaan, die towerstaf se laaste ware meester! As alles volgens plan verloop het, sou die towerstaf se mag saam met hom doodgegaan het, want dit is nooit van hom gewen nie!"

"Maar dan, Potter, het Dumbledore mos die towerstaf vir my gegee!" Voldemort se stem tril van bose plesier. "Ek het die towerstaf

uit sy laaste meester se graf gesteel! Ek het dit teen sy laaste meester se wense verwyder! Die towerstaf se mag is myne!"

"Jy verstaan steeds nie, Riddle. Dis nie genoeg om die towerstaf te besit nie! Om dit vas te hou, dit te gebruik, maak dit nie regtig joune nie. Het jy nie na Ollivander geluister nie? *Die towerstaf kies die towenaar* . . . Die Vlierstaf het 'n nuwe meester gekies voor Dumbledore dood is, iemand wat nooit eens sy hand daarop gelê het nie. Die nuwe meester het die towerstaf teen Dumbledore se wil van hom verwyder, sonder om te besef wat presies hy gedoen het, of dat die wêreld se gevaarlikste towerstaf sy trou aan hom geskenk het . . ."

Voldemort se borskas rys en daal nou vinnig, en Harry voel die vloek aan, voel dit opbou in die towerstaf wat op sy gesig gerig is.

"Die Vlierstaf se ware meester was Draco Malfoy."

Begriplose skok registreer vir 'n oomblik lank op Voldemort se gesig, dan is dit weg.

"Maar wat maak dit saak?" sê hy sag. "Selfs al is jy reg, Potter, maak dit geen verskil aan my en jou nie. Jy het nie meer die fenikstowerstaf nie: ons veg slegs op talent teen mekaar . . . en nadat ek jou vermoor het, sal ek na Draco Malfoy omsien . . ."

"Maar jy's te laat," sê Harry. "Jy't jou kans verbeur. Ek was eerste daar. Ek het Draco weke gelede oorrompel. Ek het hierdie towerstaf by hom afgevat."

Harry maak 'n effense beweging met die haagdoringtowerstaf, en hy voel almal in die Saal se oë daarop.

"So dit kom alles hierop neer, of hoe?" fluister Harry. "Weet die towerstaf in jou hand sy laaste meester is Ontwapen? Want as dit so is . . . is ek die Vlierstaf se ware meester."

'n Rooigoud gloed bars skielik uit oor die betowerde lug bokant hulle toe 'n strepie verblindende son oor die naaste vensterbank verskyn. Die lig tref albei se gesigte gelyktydig, sodat Voldemort s'n meteens 'n vlammende waas is. Harry hoor die skril stem skree terwyl hy ook sy beste doen en met Draco se towerstaf mik.

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Expelliarmus!"

Die knal is soos 'n kanonskoot en die goue vlamme wat tussen hulle opskiet, reg in die middel van die sirkel waarin hulle beweeg het, is die punt waar die towerspreuke teen mekaar bots. Harry sien hoe ontmoet Voldemort se groen straal sy towerspreuk, sien hoe vlieg die Vlierstaf hoog op, donker teen die sonsopkoms, tol oor die betowerde plafon soos Nagini se kop, tol deur die lug na die meester wat dit nie sal doodmaak nie, wat uiteindelik gekom het

om volle besit daarvan te neem. En Harry, met die onfeilbare vaardigheid van die Soeker, vang die towerstaf met sy los hand terwyl Voldemort agteroor val, arms oopgesprei, die vuurrooi oë se skrefiepupille wat boontoe rol. Tom Riddle tref die vloer met banale finaliteit, sy liggaam kragteloos en verkrimp, die wit hande leeg, die slanggesig wesenloos en onwetend. Voldemort is dood, deur sy eie weerkaatste vloek getref, en Harry staan met twee towerstawwe in sy hand en staar af na sy vyand se leë dop.

Daar is een sidderende sekonde lank stilte; die skok van die oomblik hang in die lug: en dan bars 'n rumoer om Harry los en die omstanders se gejuig en gebrul weerklink deur die Saal. Die fel oggendson skitter op die vensters terwyl hulle op hom afstorm, en die eerste mense wat by hom uitkom, is Ron en Hermione, en dit is hulle arms wat hom toevou, hulle onverstaanbare uitroepe wat hom verdoof. Dan is Ginny, Neville en Luna daar, en al die Weasleys en Hagrid, en Kingsley en McGonagall en Flitwick en Sprout, en Harry kan nie 'n woord hoor wat enigiemand sê, of uitmaak wie se hande hom gryp, aan hom trek, 'n deel van hom probeer druk nie; honderde van hulle omring hom, almal vasberade om te raak aan die Seun Wat Bly Leef Het, die rede dat dit alles nou verby is –

Die son kom stadig oor Hogwarts op, en die Groot Saal skitter van lewe en lig. Harry is 'n onmisbare deel van die gemengde uitroepe van vreugde en verdriet, van verheerliking en rou. Hulle wil hom daar by hulle hê, hulle leier en simbool, hulle redder en hulle wegwyser, en niemand dink blykbaar daaraan dat hy nie geslaap het nie, dat hy na net 'n paar van hulle se geselskap smag nie. Hy moet met die bedroefdes praat, hulle hande vashou, hulle trane aanskou, hulle dank ontvang, die nuus hoor wat met die verloop van die oggend uit alle oorde instroom, dat almal oral in die land wat ge-Imperius is weer hulleself is, dat Doodseters vlug of andersins gevange geneem word, dat die onskuldiges op daardie oomblik uit Azkaban vrygelaat word, en dat Kingsley Shacklebolt tydelik as Minister van Towerkuns aangewys is . . .

Hulle verwyder Voldemort se liggaam en lê dit neer in 'n kamer wat uit die Saal loop, weg van Fred, Tonks, Lupin, Colin Creevey en vyftig ander wat gesterf het in die stryd teen hom. McGonagall het die huistafels laat terugbring, maar niemand sit meer volgens huis nie: almal sit deurmekaar, onderwysers en studente, spoke en ouers, sentours en huiselwe, en Firenze herstel in 'n hoek, en Ghrop loer deur 'n gebreekte venster in, en mense gooi kos by sy laggende mond in. Ná 'n ruk beland Harry uitgeput en energieloos op 'n bank langs Luna.

"As ek jy was, sou ek vrede en stilte wou hê," sê sy.

"Sal mal wees daaroor," antwoord hy.

"Ek sal almal se aandag aflei," sê sy. "Gebruik jou Mantel."

En voor hy 'n woord kan sê, roep sy uit: "Ooo, kyk, 'n Blibberende Katoeter!" en wys by die venster uit. Almal wat haar hoor, kyk om, en Harry glip die Mantel oor hom en staan op.

Nou kan hy ongehinderd deur die Saal beweeg. Hy sien Ginny twee tafels verder; sy sit met haar kop op haar ma se skouer: daar sal later tyd wees om te gesels, ure en dae en miskien jare om in te gesels. Hy sien Neville: Gryffindor se swaard lê langs sy bord terwyl hy eet, omring deur 'n groep vurige bewonderaars. Hy loop in die paadjie tussen die tafels af en hy sien die drie Malfoys, saamgebondel asof hulle onseker is of hulle veronderstel is om hier te wees, of nie, maar niemand steur hulle aan hulle nie. Oral waar hy kyk, sien hy families wat herenig is en uiteindelik sien hy die twee na wie se geselskap hy die meeste smag.

"Dis ek," prewel hy en hurk tussen hulle. "Kom saam met my!"

Hulle staan dadelik op, en hy, Ron en Hermione verlaat die Groot Saal saam. Daar is groot happe in die marmertrap, 'n deel van die trapreling is weg, en hulle sien rommel en bloedvlekke op 'n paar trappe soos hulle boontoe gaan.

Iewers op die agtergrond hoor hulle Peeves; hy zoem deur die gange en sing 'n oorwinningslied wat hy self gekomponeer het:

Ons het dit gedoen, ons het hulle opgedons, klein Pottie is die Een,
En Voldie's in sy peetjie, so ons vier fees, kom dans en lig jou been!

"Dit som die omvang en tragedie van die hele storie goed op, nè?" sê Ron en stoot 'n deur oop om Harry en Hermione deur te laat.

Blydskap sal nog kom, dink Harry, maar op die oomblik word dit getemper deur uitputting en die pyn van die verlies van Fred en Lupin en Tonks wat elke paar tree deur hom skiet soos 'n fisieke wond. Hy voel bowenal 'n absoluut oorweldigende verligting, en 'n behoefte aan slaap. Maar eers skuld hy Ron en Hermione 'n verduideliking; hulle het hom so lank ondersteun en verdien die waarheid. Hy vertel sorgvuldig vir hulle wat hy in die Peinssif gesien het en wat in die Woud gebeur het, en hulle het nog nie eens begin om uiting te gee aan hulle skok en verstomming nie toe hulle uiteindelik aankom by die plek waarheen hulle geloop het, hoewel nie een van hulle genoem het wat hulle bestemming is nie.

Sedert hy dit laas gesien het, is die draakkop wat die ingang na die skoolhoof se kantoor bewaak, opsy gestamp: dit staan skeef en

lyk effens vuisvoos, en Harry wonder of dit nog in staat is om wagwoorde te onderskei.

"Kan ons opgaan?" vra hy vir die draakkop.

"Voel vry," kreun die draakkop.

Hulle klouter oor hom en stap op met die klipwenteltrap wat stadig soos 'n roltrap boontoe beweeg. Harry stoot die deur aan die bokant oop.

Hy kyk vinnig na die Peinssif van klip wat hy op die lessenaar gelos het, en dan laat 'n oorverdowende geluid hom uitroep en dink aan vloeke en Doodseters wat terugkom en Voldemort wat herlewe –

Maar dit is applous. Oral teen die mure rondom hom gee Hogwarts se skoolhoofde vir hom 'n staande ovasie; hulle waai hulle hoedens en in sommige gevalle hulle pruike, hulle reik uit deur hulle rame om mekaar se hande te gryp; hulle dans op en af op die stoele waarop hulle geskilder is. Dilys Derwent snik onbeskaamd, Dexter Fortescue waai sy gehoorbuis, en Phineas Nigellus roep in sy hoë, skril stem: "En let daarop dat huis Slytherin sy rol gespeel het! Laat ons bydrae nie vergete bly nie!"

Maar Harry het net oë vir die man wat in die grootste portret reg agter die skoolhoof se stoel staan. Trane rol van agter die halfmaanbril uit, af tot in die lang silwer baard, en die trots en die dankbaarheid wat uit hom straal, vul Harry met dieselfde balsem as die feniks se lied.

Oplaas lig Harry sy hande, en die portrette word eerbiedig stil, vee hulle oë af, en wag oorstelp van vreugde en gretig dat hy moet praat. Maar hy rig sy woorde tot Dumbledore en kies hulle baie versigtig. Al is hy pootuit en leepoog, moet hy een laaste poging aanwend, een laaste stukkie advies kry.

"Die ding wat in die Snip weggesteek was," begin hy. "Ek het dit in die Woud laat val. Ek weet nie presies waar nie, maar ek gaan nie weer daarna soek nie. Stem u saam?"

"Beslis, my liewe seun, " sê Dumbledore terwyl sy medeskilderye verward en nuuskierig lyk. "Dit was 'n wyse en dapper besluit, maar niks minder as wat ek van jou sou verwag nie. Weet enigiemand anders waar dit geval het?"

"Niemand nie," sê Harry, en Dumbledore knik tevrede.

"Maar ek gaan Ignotus se present hou," sê Harry en Dumbledore glimlag.

"Natuurlik, Harry, dit is joune vir ewig, totdat jy dit vir iemand anders gee!"

"En dan is daar nog dit."

Harry lig die Vlierstaf, en Ron en Hermione staar daarna met 'n ontsag waarvan Harry nie hou nie, selfs in sy toestand van beneweldheid en gebrek aan slaap.

"Ek wil dit nie hê nie," sê Harry.

"Wat?" sê Ron hard. "Is jy getik?"

"Ek weet dis magtig," sê Harry afgemat. "Maar ek was gelukkiger met myne. So . . ."

Hy krap rond in die sakkie wat om sy nek hang en haal die twee helftes van die steekpalm wat nog deur die dunste draadjie feniksveer verbind word uit. Hermione het gesê dit kan nie reggemaak word nie, die skade is te groot. Al wat hy weet, is as dít nie werk nie, sal niks nie.

Hy sit die gebreekte towerstaf op die skoolhoof se lessenaar neer, tik liggies met die Vlierstaf se punt daaraan en sê: *"Reparo."*

Rooi vonke vlieg by die punt van sy towerstaf uit terwyl dit herseël. Harry weet hy het dit reggekry. Hy tel die steekpalm-en-feniks-towerstaf op en voel 'n skielike warmte in sy vingers, asof towerstaf en hand verheug is om herenig te wees.

"Ek gaan die Vlierstaf terugsit," sê hy vir Dumbledore wat hom met geweldige teerheid en bewondering dophou, "waar dit vandaan kom. Dit kan daar bly. As ek soos Ignotus 'n natuurlike dood sterf, sal sy mag verbreek wees, of hoe? Die vorige meester sal dan nooit verslaan gewees het nie. Dit sal die einde daarvan beteken."

Dumbledore knik. Hulle glimlag vir mekaar.

"Is jy seker?" vra Ron. Daar is 'n vae beduidenis van begeerte in sy stem terwyl hy na die Vlierstaf kyk.

"Ek dink Harry is reg," sê Hermione stil.

"Daardie towerstaf veroorsaak meer moeilikheid as enigiets anders," sê Harry. "En om heeltemal eerlik te wees," hy draai weg van die geskilderde portrette af, en dink nou net aan die hemelbed wat vir hom in Gryffindor-toring wag, en wonder of Skepsel dalk vir hom 'n toebroodjie soontoe sal bring, "ek het genoeg moeilikheid vir 'n leeftyd gehad."

NINETEEN YEARS LATER

EPILOGUE



NINETEEN YEARS LATER

Autumn seemed to arrive suddenly that year. The morning of the first of September was crisp and golden as an apple, and as the little family bobbed across the rumbling road toward the great sooty station, the fumes of car exhausts and the breath of pedestrians sparkled like cobwebs in the cold air. Two large cages rattled on top of the laden trolleys the parents were pushing; the owls inside them hooted indignantly, and the redheaded girl trailed tearfully behind her brothers, clutching her father's arm.

"It won't be long, and you'll be going too," Harry told her.

"Two years," sniffed Lily. "I want to go *now*!"

The commuters stared curiously at the owls as the family wove its

way toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Albus's voice drifted back to Harry over the surrounding clamor; his sons had resumed the argument they had started in the car.

"I *won't*! I *won't* be in Slytherin!"

"James, give it a rest!" said Ginny.

"I only said he *might* be," said James, grinning at his younger brother. "There's nothing wrong with that. He *might* be in Slyth —"

But James caught his mother's eye and fell silent. The five Potters approached the barrier. With a slightly cocky look over his shoulder at his younger brother, James took the trolley from his mother and broke into a run. A moment later, he had vanished.

"You'll write to me, won't you?" Albus asked his parents immediately, capitalizing on the momentary absence of his brother.

"Every day, if you want us to," said Ginny.

"Not *every* day," said Albus quickly. "James says most people only get letters from home about once a month."

"We wrote to James three times a week last year," said Ginny.

"And you don't want to believe everything he tells you about Hogwarts," Harry put in. "He likes a laugh, your brother."

Side by side, they pushed the second trolley forward, gathering speed. As they reached the barrier, Albus winced, but no collision came. Instead, the family emerged onto platform nine and three-quarters, which was obscured by thick white steam that was pouring from the scarlet Hogwarts Express. Indistinct figures were swarming through the mist, into which James had already disappeared.

"Where are they?" asked Albus anxiously, peering at the hazy forms they passed as they made their way down the platform.

"We'll find them," said Ginny reassuringly.

But the vapor was dense, and it was difficult to make out anybody's faces. Detached from their owners, voices sounded unnaturally loud. Harry thought he heard Percy discoursing loudly on broomstick regulations, and was quite glad of the excuse not to stop and say hello. . . .

"I think that's them, Al," said Ginny suddenly.

A group of four people emerged from the mist, standing alongside the very last carriage. Their faces only came into focus when Harry, Ginny, Lily, and Albus had drawn right up to them.

"Hi," said Albus, sounding immensely relieved.

Rose, who was already wearing her brand-new Hogwarts robes, beamed at him.

"Parked all right, then?" Ron asked Harry. "I did. Hermione didn't believe I could pass a Muggle driving test, did you? She thought I'd have to Confund the examiner."

"No, I didn't," said Hermione, "I had complete faith in you."

"As a matter of fact, I *did* Confund him," Ron whispered to Harry, as together they lifted Albus's trunk and owl onto the train. "I only forgot to look in the wing mirror, and let's face it, I can use a Supersensory Charm for that."

Back on the platform, they found Lily and Hugo, Rose's younger brother, having an animated discussion about which House they would be sorted into when they finally went to Hogwarts.

"If you're not in Gryffindor, we'll disinherit you," said Ron, "but no pressure."

"Ron!"

Lily and Hugo laughed, but Albus and Rose looked solemn.

"He doesn't mean it," said Hermione and Ginny, but Ron was no longer paying attention. Catching Harry's eye, he nodded covertly to a point some fifty yards away. The steam had thinned for a moment, and three people stood in sharp relief against the shifting mist.

"Look who it is."

Draco Malfoy was standing there with his wife and son, a dark coat buttoned up to his throat. His hair was receding somewhat, which emphasized the pointed chin. The new boy resembled Draco as much as Albus resembled Harry. Draco caught sight of Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny staring at him, nodded curtly, and turned away again.

"So that's little Scorpius," said Ron under his breath. "Make sure you beat him in every test, Rosie. Thank God you inherited your mother's brains."

"Ron, for heaven's sake," said Hermione, half stern, half amused. "Don't try to turn them against each other before they've even started school!"

"You're right, sorry," said Ron, but unable to help himself, he added, "Don't get *too* friendly with him, though, Rosie. Granddad Weasley would never forgive you if you married a pureblood."

"Hey!"

James had reappeared; he had divested himself of his trunk, owl, and trolley, and was evidently bursting with news.

"Teddy's back there," he said breathlessly, pointing back over his shoulder into the billowing clouds of steam. "Just seen him! And guess what he's doing? *Snogging Victoire!*"

He gazed up at the adults, evidently disappointed by the lack of reaction.

"*Our* Teddy! *Teddy Lupin!* Snogging *our* Victoire! *Our* cousin! And I asked Teddy what he was doing —"

"You interrupted them?" said Ginny. "You are *so* like Ron —"

"— and he said he'd come to see her off! And then he told me to go away. He's *snogging* her!" James added as though worried he had not made himself clear.

"Oh, it would be lovely if they got married!" whispered Lily ecstatically. "Teddy would *really* be part of the family then!"

"He already comes round for dinner about four times a week," said Harry. "Why don't we just invite him to live with us and have done with it?"

"Yeah!" said James enthusiastically. "I don't mind sharing with Al — Teddy could have my room!"

"No," said Harry firmly, "you and Al will share a room only when I want the house demolished."

He checked the battered old watch that had once been Fabian Prewett's.

"It's nearly eleven, you'd better get on board."

"Don't forget to give Neville our love!" Ginny told James as she hugged him.

"Mum! I can't give a professor *love*!"

"But you *know* Neville —"

James rolled his eyes.

"Outside, yeah, but at school he's Professor Longbottom, isn't he?

I can't walk into Herbology and give him *love*. . . ."

Shaking his head at his mother's foolishness, he vented his feelings by aiming a kick at Albus.

"See you later, Al. Watch out for the thestrals."

"I thought they were invisible? *You said they were invisible!*"

But James merely laughed, permitted his mother to kiss him, gave his father a fleeting hug, then leapt onto the rapidly filling train. They saw him wave, then sprint away up the corridor to find his friends.

"Thestrals are nothing to worry about," Harry told Albus. "They're gentle things, there's nothing scary about them. Anyway, you won't be going up to school in the carriages, you'll be going in the boats."

Ginny kissed Albus good-bye.

"See you at Christmas."

"Bye, Al," said Harry as his son hugged him. "Don't forget Hagrid's invited you to tea next Friday. Don't mess with Peeves. Don't duel anyone till you've learned how. And don't let James wind you up."

"What if I'm in Slytherin?"

The whisper was for his father alone, and Harry knew that only the moment of departure could have forced Albus to reveal how great and sincere that fear was.

Harry crouched down so that Albus's face was slightly above his own. Alone of Harry's three children, Albus had inherited Lily's eyes.

"Albus Severus," Harry said quietly, so that nobody but Ginny could hear, and she was tactful enough to pretend to be waving to

Rose, who was now on the train, "you were named for two headmasters of Hogwarts. One of them was a Slytherin and he was probably the bravest man I ever knew."

"But *just say* —"

"— then Slytherin House will have gained an excellent student, won't it? It doesn't matter to us, Al. But if it matters to you, you'll be able to choose Gryffindor over Slytherin. The Sorting Hat takes your choice into account."

"Really?"

"It did for me," said Harry.

He had never told any of his children that before, and he saw the wonder in Albus's face when he said it. But now the doors were slamming all along the scarlet train, and the blurred outlines of parents were swarming forward for final kisses, last-minute reminders. Albus jumped into the carriage and Ginny closed the door behind him. Students were hanging from the windows nearest them. A great number of faces, both on the train and off, seemed to be turned toward Harry.

"Why are they all *staring*?" demanded Albus as he and Rose craned around to look at the other students.

"Don't let it worry you," said Ron. "It's me. I'm extremely famous."

Albus, Rose, Hugo, and Lily laughed. The train began to move, and Harry walked alongside it, watching his son's thin face, already ablaze with excitement. Harry kept smiling and waving, even though it was like a little bereavement, watching his son glide away from him. . . .

The last trace of steam evaporated in the autumn air. The train rounded a corner. Harry's hand was still raised in farewell.

"He'll be all right," murmured Ginny.

As Harry looked at her, he lowered his hand absentmindedly and touched the lightning scar on his forehead.

"I know he will."

The scar had not pained Harry for nineteen years. All was well.

Negentien Jaar Later

Dit is asof herfs dié jaar skielik kom. Die oggend van die eerste September is kraakvars en goud soos 'n appel, en terwyl die gesinnetjie die dreunende straat na die groot, roetbesmeerde stasie oorsteek, skitter die motors se uitlaatgasse en die voetgangers se asems soos spinnerakke in die koue lug. Twee groot hokke ratel bo-op die volgelaaide trollies wat die ouers stoot; die uile daarin hoe-hoe verontwaardig, en die rooikopmeisie volg haar broers tranerig terwyl sy aan haar pa se arm vashou.

"Dis nie meer lank nie, dan gaan jy ook," sê Harry vir haar.

"Dis nog twee jaar," snuif Lily. "Ek wil *nou* gaan!"

Die pendelaars kyk nuuskierig na die uile terwyl die gesin deur hulle vleg op pad na die versperring tussen perronne nege en tien. Albus se stem dryf terug na Harry oor die omringende lawaai; sy seuns het die argument wat hulle in die motor begin het, hervat.

"Ek sal *nie*! Ek sal *nie* in Slytherin wees nie!"

"James, los dit nou!" sê Ginny.

"Ek het net gesê hy sal *dalk* daar wees," sê James terwyl hy vir sy jonger broer grinnik. "Daar's niks verkeerd daarmee nie. Hy sal *dalk* in Slyth– "

Maar James vang sy ma se oog en bly stil. Die vyf Potters beweeg na die versperring toe. Met 'n effense parmantige kyk oor sy skouer na sy jonger broer vat James die trollie by sy ma en begin hardloop. 'n Oomblik later verdwyn hy.

Albus slaan munt uit sy broer se vlugtige afwesigheid en vra dadelik vir sy ouers: "Julle *sal* vir my skryf, nè?"

"Elke dag, as jy wil hê ons moet," sê Ginny.

"Nie *elke* dag nie," sê Albus vinnig. "James sê die meeste ouens kry omtrent een keer per maand briewe van die huis af."

"Ons het verlede jaar drie keer per week vir James geskryf," sê Ginny.

"En jy moenie alles glo wat hy jou van Hogwarts vertel nie," voeg Harry by. "Jou broer hou van grappies maak."

Sy aan sy stoot hulle die tweede trollie vorentoe en tel spoed op. Toe hulle by die versperring kom, huiwer Albus by voorbaat, maar daar is nie 'n botsing nie. In plaas daarvan kom die gesin uit op perron nege-en-'n-driekwart, wat toe is onder dik wit stoom wat by die helderrooi Hogwarts Express uitborrel. Onduidelike figure swerm deur die mis waarin James reeds verdwyn het.

"Waar is hulle?" vra Albus benoud en tuur na die wasige vorms wat hulle verbysteek terwyl hulle by die perron af beweeg.

"Ons sal hulle kry," sê Ginny gerusstellend.

Maar die stoom is dig, en dit is moeilik om enigiemand se gesig uit te maak. Geskei van hulle eienaars klink die stemme onnatuurlik hard. Harry verbeel hom hy hoor Percy luidkeels besemstokregulasies aframmel, en is nogal bly hy het 'n verskoning om nie te stop en hallo te sê nie . . .

"Ek dink dis hulle, Al," sê Ginny skielik.

'n Groep van vier mense wat langs die heel laaste wa staan, verskyn uit die mis. Hulle gesigte kom eers in fokus toe Harry, Ginny, Lily en Albus tot reg by hulle kom.

"Haai," sê Albus en klink skielik geweldig verlig.

Rose, wat reeds haar splinternuwe Hogwarts-kleed aanhet, glimlag breed vir hom.

"Toe reggekom met die parkering?" vra Ron vir Harry. "Ek het. Hermione wou nie glo ek kan 'n Moggelbestuurstoets slaag nie. Sy dog ek sou die toetsbeampte met 'n Warvloek moes bykom."

"Dis nie waar nie," sê Hermione. "Ek het die volste vertroue in jou gehad."

"Om die waarheid te sê, ek *het* hom ge-War," fluister Ron vir Harry terwyl hulle Albus se trommel en uil saam by die trein inlaai. "Ek het net vergeet om in die syspieël te kyk, en kom ons wees nou maar eerlik, ek kan 'n Supersensoriese Towerspreuk daarvoor gebruik."

Terug op die perron vind hulle Lily en Hugo, Rose se jonger broer, in 'n lewendige bespreking gewikkel oor die huis waarin hulle ge-Sorteer sal word wanneer hulle uiteindelik Hogwarts toe gaan.

"As jy nie in Gryffindor is nie, gaan ons jou onterf," sê Ron, "maar g'n druk nie, hoor."

"Ron!"

Lily en Hugo lag, maar Albus en Rose lyk ernstig.

"Hy bedoel dit nie," sê Hermione en Ginny, maar Ron se aandag is reeds elders. Hy vang Harry se oog en knik onderlangs na 'n plek so vyftig tree weg. Die stoom het vir 'n oomblik dunner geword, en drie mense staan skerp afgeteken teen die misslierte.

"Kyk wie's daar."
Draco Malfoy staan daar saam met sy vrou en seun; 'n donker jas tot by sy keel toegeknoop. Sy hare raak al effens yl aan die slape en dit beklemtoon sy skerp ken. Die eerstejaartjie lyk so baie na Draco as wat Albus na Harry lyk. Draco sien hoe Harry, Ron, Hermione en Ginny hom aanstaar, knik stug en draai weer weg.

"So dis klein Scorpius," brom Ron binnensmonds. "Maak seker jy stof hom in elke toets uit, Rosie. Dank die vader jy't jou ma se brein geërf."

"Ron, om hemelswil," sê Hermione half streng, half geamuseerd. "Moenie hulle teen mekaar probeer opsteek nog voor hulle eens begin skoolgaan het nie!"

"Jy's reg, jammer," sê Ron, maar hy kan homself nie keer nie en voeg by: "Moet net nie *te* groot vriende met hom word nie, Rosie. Oupa Weasley sal jou nooit vergewe as jy met 'n suiwerbloed trou nie."

"Hei!"

James verskyn weer. Hy het van sy trommel, uil en trollie ontslae geraak en bars duidelik om sy nuus te vertel.

"Teddy's daaragter," sê hy uitasem en wys oor sy skouer na die borrelende stoomwolke. "Ek't hom nou net gesien! En raai wat doen hy? *Hy vry met Victoire!*"

Hy kyk op na die volwassenes, blykbaar teleurgesteld oor hulle gebrek aan reaksie.

"*Ons* Teddy! *Teddy Lupin!* Hy vry met *ons* Victoire! *Ons* niggie! En ek het vir Teddy gevra wat dink hy doen hy –"

"Jy't hulle onderbreek?" sê Ginny. "Jy aard *so* na Ron –"

"– en hy't gesê hy't haar kom afsien! En toe sê hy vir my ek moet loop. Hy *vry* met haar!" voeg James by asof hy bekommerd is dat hy hom nie duidelik uitgedruk het nie.

"O, dit sal wonderlik wees as hulle trou!" fluister Lily in ekstase. "Teddy sal dan *rêrig* deel van die familie wees!"

"Hy kom eet al klaar omtrent vier aande per week by ons," sê Harry. "Hoekom nooi ons hom nie om by ons te kom woon nie, en klaar?"

"Ja!" sê James entoesiasties. "Ek sal nie omgee om met Al te deel nie – Teddy kan my kamer kry!"

"Nee," sê Harry beslis, "jy en Al sal slegs 'n kamer deel wanneer ek wil hê die huis moet afgebreek word."

Hy kyk op die gehawende ou horlosie wat eens op 'n tyd Fabian Prewett s'n was.

"Dis amper elfuur, julle beter inklim."

"Moenie vergeet om vir Neville te sê ons stuur liefde nie!" sê Ginny vir James terwyl sy hom 'n drukkie gee.

"Ma! Ek kan nie vir 'n professor *liefde* stuur nie!"

"Maar jy *ken* Neville –"

James rol sy oë.

"Buitekant, ja, maar by die skool is hy professor Longbottom. Ek kan nie by Kruiekunde inloop en vir hom *liefde* stuur nie . . ."

Hy skud sy kop oor sy ma se lawwigheid en lug sy gevoelens deur 'n skop na Albus toe te mik.

"Sien jou later, Al. Oppas vir die Testrals."

"Ek dog hulle's onsigbaar? *Jy't gesê hulle's onsigbaar!*"

Maar James lag net, laat sy ma toe om hom te soen, gee sy pa 'n vlugtige drukkie en spring dan in die trein wat nou vinnig vol word. Hulle sien hoe hy wuif en dan by die gang af laat spaander om sy vriende te gaan soek.

"Testrals is niks om oor bekommerd te wees nie," sê Harry vir Albus. "Hulle is saggeaarde goed, jy hoef glad nie vir hulle bang te wees nie. In elk geval, julle gaan nie in die koetse op skool toe nie, julle gaan in die bote."

Ginny soen Albus tot siens.

"Sien jou Kersfees."

"Baai, Al," sê Harry terwyl sy seun hom omhels. "Moenie vergeet nie, Hagrid het jou genooi om volgende Vrydag by hom te gaan tee drink. Moenie met Peeves sukkel nie. Moet met niemand in 'n tweegeveg betrokke raak voor jy nie geleer het hoe nie. En moenie dat James jou omkrap nie."

"Wat as ek in Slytherin is?"

Hy fluister dit net vir sy pa, en Harry weet dit is slegs die oomblik van vertrek wat Albus gedwing het om te wys hoe groot en opreg daardie vrees is.

Harry hurk sodat Albus se gesig effens bokant syne is. Albus is die enigste een van Harry se drie kinders wat Lily se oë geërf het.

"Albus Severus," sê Harry sag sodat niemand behalwe Ginny kan hoor nie, en sy is taktvol genoeg om te maak of sy waai vir Rose, wat nou in die trein is, "jy is na twee van Hogwarts se skoolhoofde vernoem. Een van hulle was 'n Slytherin en hy was heel moontlik die dapperste man wat ek nog ooit geken het."

"Maar *sê nou net* –"

"– dan kry huis Slytherin 'n uitstekende student, of hoe? Dit maak nie vir ons saak nie, Al. Maar as dit vir jou saak maak, sal jy tussen Gryffindor en Slytherin kan kies. Die Sorteerhoed neem jou keuse in ag."

"Regtig?"

"Dit het met my," sê Harry.

Hy het dit nog nooit vir enigeen van sy kinders vertel nie, en hy sien die verwondering op Albus se gesig toe hy dit sê. Maar nou klap die deure al met die helderrooi trein af toe en ouers se wasige buitelyne sweef vorentoe vir laaste soene, laaste vermanings. Albus spring by die wa in en Ginny maak die deur agter hom toe. Studente hang by die vensters naaste aan hulle uit. 'n Groot getal gesigte, sowel in die trein as op die perron, draai na Harry toe.

"Hoekom *staar* hulle almal so?" wil Albus weet terwyl hy en Rose hulle nekke rek om na die ander studente te kyk.

"Moenie dat dit jou pla nie," sê Ron. "Dis ek. Ek is ontsaglik beroemd."

Albus, Rose, Hugo en Lily lag. Die trein begin beweeg, en Harry loop saam en kyk na sy seun se smal gesig wat reeds gloei van opwinding. Harry hou aan glimlag en wuif, al voel dit soos 'n swaar verlies toe hy kyk hoe sy seun van hom af weggly . . .

Die laaste teken van stoom verdamp in die herfslug. Die trein verdwyn om 'n draai. Harry se hand is nog steeds gelig in 'n groet.

"Hy sal oukei wees," prewel Ginny.

Terwyl Harry na haar kyk, laat sak hy sy hand ingedagte en raak aan die weerliglitteken op sy voorkop.

"Ek weet hy sal."

Harry se litteken het negentien jaar gelede laas gepyn. Alles is wel.